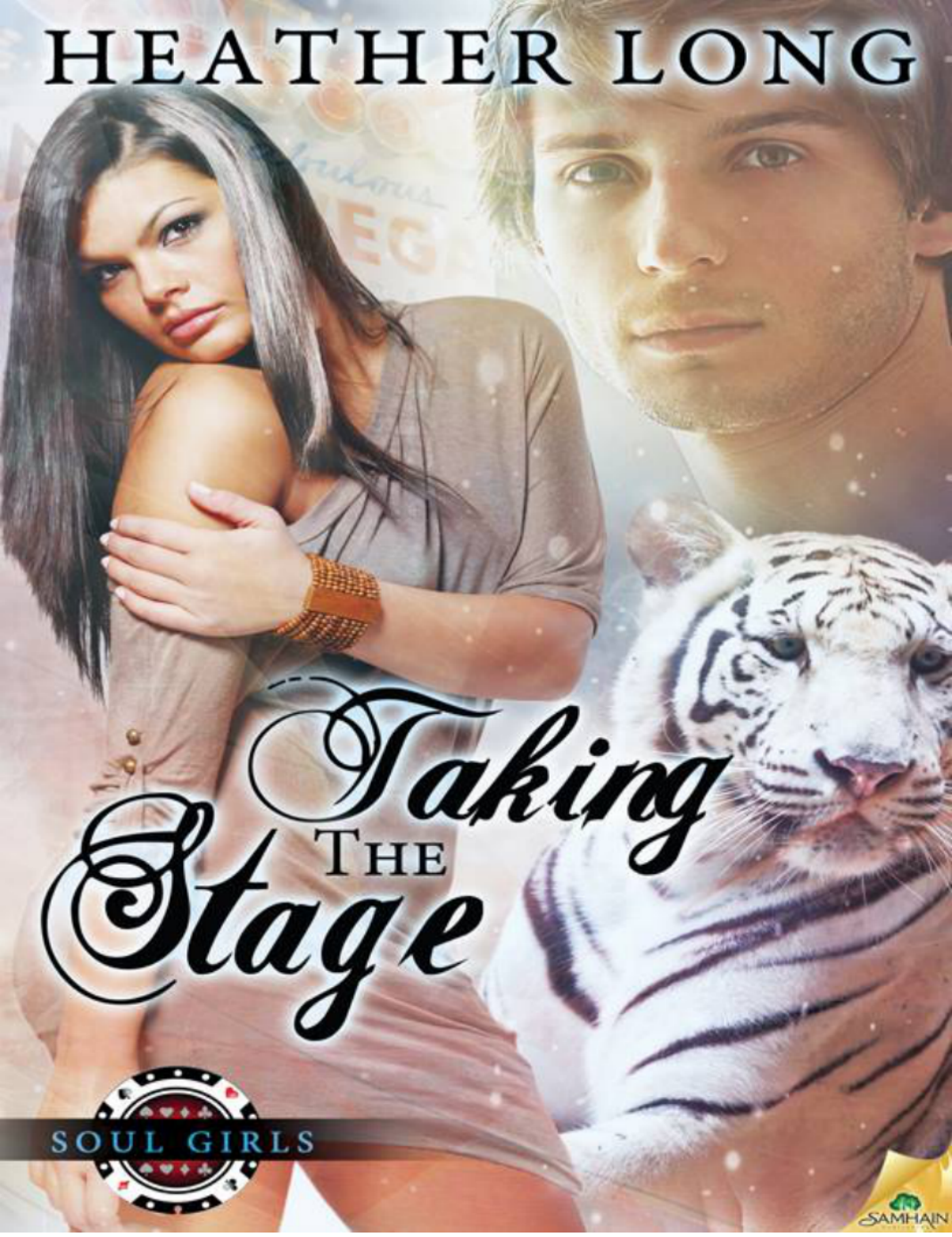
HEATHER LONG
Taking The Stage
SOUL GIRLS
SAMHAIN

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Roseatre takes one look at the white tigers that the stage manager has brought in to shake things up at the Midnight Mystery Lounge, and nearly has a heart attack. It doesn t matter that the beautiful creatures handler raises her pulse and makes her want to purr. The tigers are sure to recognize her and arouse her need for the hunt.

Pride outcast Anthony diNapoli wasn t expecting to encounter an Amazon princess when he brought his white tigers to the lounge. The lucrative show will go a long way toward securing his future, but not if he gives in to the urge to make her submit to his dominance, and claim her as his mate.

No matter how desperately her body aches for the sun-kissed stranger and his completely lickable abs, Roseatre is no man s prize. Yet she finds herself hungering for Anthony to defeat her and take her for his own.

It s show time in the Arcana Royale s Midnight Mystery Lounge and all bets are off.

Warning: Contains sword fights, shackles, sexy showgirls, and a game of dominance between a determined weretiger and an Amazon who refuses to submit. Blades, bliss and battles, oh my!

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Taking the Stage
Soulgirls 2
by
Heather Long

For my soulgirls. You make me smile.

Chapter One

"Not the toes." Roseâtre refused to squeal. As lead dancer for the Arcana Royale's Midnight Mystery Lounge, she would never squeal or scream, but her voice pitched high enough that the syllable at the end of *toes* cracked.

The great white tiger snuffling her feet through the five-inch strappy black-and-sapphire Louboutins rolled his head away. Instead of obeying, he stroked a whiskered cheek down her bare leg.

"Cut!" Voice booming, the show's stage manager hustled out from the wings. Heidi was a brisk woman with a quick temper and a stout body, dedicated to creating the best shows. After Pandora's escape from her contract, she relied on all of her girls to have the same dedication to the performance, Roseâtre more than most.

Pandora. She'd always made the lead look easy. She'd walked out on the stage and owned the audience. Roseâtre believed Pandora could have shared the stage with twelve chimpanzees and it wouldn't have mattered. Gazes would have been riveted to the tawny nymph.

The white tiger stretched out his neck and yawned, showing off a mouthful of glistening teeth. He flexed his paws, claws scoring the stage. She wasn't fooled by the sleepy-eyed expression or house-cat similarities. Big cats weren't pets.

The rest of the dancers relaxed from their poses, some even dropping down to coo and stroke the cats whose arrival had elicited a long round of *awws* and *aren't they sweets*. Roseâtre, however, shifted away from the cat with his tickling whiskers and raspy tongue.

"Rose?" Heidi beckoned, a pen behind one ear and a notebook tucked under her arm. She pursed her lips in a you're-not-in-trouble-yet moue, but the wrinkles knitting her brow told an entirely different story.

"Yes, ma'am?" Roseâtre didn't drag her feet. One certainly never dragged Louboutins, but she couldn't quite resist displaying her mutiny with an uplifted chin and wrinkled nose.

Cats.

Her nose twitched. Her sinuses burned. Her eyes threatened tears. But she maintained her composure.

Damn cats.

"Look, I know you're not thrilled with this idea." The opening gambit was classic Heidi, softening her up for the too-damn-bad often attached to those statements.

Closeted together at the far end of the stage, Roseâtre was glad to be out of earshot of her shield-sister Cerveau, the other dancers and thankfully, the damn tigers.

The Midnight Mystery Lounge was closed for an entire week so the dancers could learn this new act. She'd woken to the bad news that the diNapoli Tigers—*tigers*—were joining the show for a three-month trial to drum up business in the magical casino and resort.

"But you're just going to have to get over it. The apothecary will provide you with a tea for your allergies. We need this show and you're the headliner. That means you and the tiger will be all over each other on that stage and you're going to love it."

And there it was, the verbal slap demanding submission. The command chafed. But a promise was a promise and she was as bound by her oath as her shield-sister Cerveau was by her curse.

"Is there any way we can do this without cats?"

"Not really, no." The sympathy was real, but from Heidi's compressed expression, the stage manager was plainly not on Roseâtre's side. "I'm sorry, Rose. But the diNapoli Tigers were an enormous success in Monaco and Paris. We need them for resurgence of interest or the Overseers may very well break up the show."

"Really?" Panic drifted under the surface of her skin, sending her heart puttering. The Overseers controlled the Arcana Royale, the sprawling complex where meta-humans of all types were welcome and could be themselves. They controlled the shows, the people and in the case of the dancers, their souls. Breaking up the show meant the dancers with varying leases on their souls could be placed elsewhere at the Overseers' discretion.

Worse, Roseâtre and Cerveau could be separated. Roseâtre couldn't allow that to happen. She'd sworn an oath. Pride could be sacrificed. Honor could not.

A shield-borne oath was an oath.

"I'll *try*. It's not just the allergy, though."

"What is it?"

No simple answer existed. Roseâtre glanced over her shoulder to where the great cats lounged. Some groomed themselves while yet another rolled over on its back, presenting its belly to Peppermint for attention. Of all the dancers, Peppermint was the most gracious, the most loving and the most likely to enjoy gamboling with the tigers on the stage.

"I assure you, *nothing* is wrong with *my* cats." The dark, deep masculine tones teased up her spine. She jerked her attention back to discover a bare-chested, bare-footed blond god had joined them.

Oh my. Who did he kill to get those abs?

She snapped her jaw shut with a flicker of irritation, and forced her gaze up from the hard six-pack of clear-cut muscle to roam over the ripped planes of his chest and shoulders.

Dear gods, does it end?

The cool dislike in his blue eyes slapped her back to the present. Everything about the man seemed larger than life, from his thick thighs, easily three times the size of hers, to his wide hands and square, chiseled jaw.

"Roseâtre, Anthony diNapoli." Heidi's snapped introduction rebuked her. "Anthony, this is our headliner, Roseâtre."

Be professional. She extended her hand and kept her gaze focused above his chin. Despite the five additional inches her designer shoes added to her considerable height, topping at around six foot, the man towered over her.

And he inspected her with an air of detached amusement, his gaze clearly dipping below her chin to where her breasts strained against the confinement of the black leotard.

"Your pleasure, I'm sure." The bastard smiled and ignored her hand.

"Anthony's cats are in high demand, and he's graciously consented to this trial contract so we're going to do the best we can to make the most of this situation." Heidi turned to Anthony as though unaware of the icy drop in Roseâtre's regard. "We'll add extra rehearsal time so Roseâtre and her cat can get used to each other."

We will? Incredulous, Roseâtre could barely pull her eyes away from Anthony to look at the stage manager. "More rehearsals?" Tired of holding her hand out to the air, she let it drop.

"Absolutely." Heidi nodded briskly, clapping her hands and striding away to gather the dancers, completely ignoring the cats with the poise of one who was likely more dangerous than the wild animals. "Ladies!"

Cerveau stood next to Kiki, Peppermint and Amber, the question in her expression obvious, but Roseâtre shook her head, waving her off with one short hand gesture. She didn't need backup.

"So what's your problem with cats, princess?" The words shivered up her spine. Anthony's voice prowled behind her, his body heat brushing against her in challenge and invitation.

"Does it matter?"

She didn't have to play nice. The bastard couldn't be bothered to shake her hand.

"It might. You're going to be *riding* my tiger every night for the next three months." The words dripped with mockery and some other indefinable emotion.

Roseâtre shifted away, sparing him a dismissive look. She'd practiced the art of cool disdain for years under her mother's tutelage. He might call her princess in his low, rolling sexy voice as a jest, but it didn't make it any less true.

"What's the problem now, princess?"

“You’re getting sarcasm on my shoes.” She lifted one, taking great care to inspect it.

Anthony threw his head back and laughed, a deep belly-trembling shout of amusement.

The noise drew the dancers’ attention like children to free chocolate. Cerveau’s face twisted comically, a mixture of censure and curiosity reddening her cheeks. She wouldn’t approve the tone, but she would appreciate the cause.

“You still haven’t told me why you don’t like my cats.”

“They’re cats.”

Head canted to the right, he studied her. The deep blue of his eyes was enhanced by a circle of darker blue along the iris. His pupils seemed to blink on their own, but that wasn’t possible. Roseâtre forced her gaze back to his dimples, just barely disguised by the thick rush of blond beard coating his cheeks.

“Cats are magnificent, bold and affectionate creatures. They are slow to trust, but have unshakable loyalty.”

“Until you’re dead and then they just eat your corpse.” She shuddered.

He laughed again. “You don’t need your body when you’re dead.”

She was missing everything Heidi was saying to the other dancers. Clearly, the stage manager didn’t care because she wasn’t even looking in Roseâtre’s direction, much less shooting her with her optic laser beams of impatience.

“I’d rather my body was undisturbed, thank you very much. The idea of anything feasting after I’m dead is unappealing.” Not to mention sacrilegious. A warrior’s death should be honored with blades and flame, never teeth.

Or, the gods forbid, a hairball. Roseâtre grimaced.

“Would you prefer they do it while you’re alive?” The silken whisper brushed against her ear. Tingles raced over her skin from the sweep of his beard on her cheek.

Heart leaping, Roseâtre barely managed to suppress her startled scream and settled for smacking his chest. The hard muscles didn’t even budge as her hand made contact, leaving a vivid, white mark against the golden tan.

“You really need to stop doing that.” *Enough is enough. The man might be here at Heidi’s request or the Overseers’, but his job was to deal with the damn cats*.

“Stop what?” The mock innocence coating his teasing grin reminded her more of the tiger yawning than it did a conciliatory gesture.

“Invading my bubble.” She rolled her hand in the air between them. “You haven’t been invited into my bubble.”

The coolness in his gaze warmed considerably, his grin widened. He was obviously enjoying the hell out of her irritation.

"How does one get invited into your bubble?" He batted the air in front of her, a downright playful gesture that sank its claws into her belly.

Nope. Not going to be turned on.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, her gaze dipped back to the ripple of his abs as he edged closer and she backed up. For every step she took, he closed the distance until he was practically leaning forward into her personal space, amusement shining from his sinfully blue eyes.

She stopped abruptly when she realized they were alone on the stage.

Except for the cats.

Where did they go? All the dancers had left the stage, abandoning Roseâtre to the crazy, sexy blond god and a collection of behemoth tigers in various stages of repose.

"You didn't answer my question, princess. You aren't scared, are you?"

Don't run.

The instinct to cut her losses, dart off the stage and race up the aisle of the empty lounge as fast as her Louboutins would carry her, roared through her. Hot on the heels of that flash fire was stony resolve.

"Princesses don't run, Ruth. They stand the battlefield. They lead the charge. Their armies must know that their leaders will return with their shields carried upon them."

Roseâtre was her stage name. Her real identity—Ruth Ann—was a Princess Royal, born to the Queen of the Amazons. Hers was the first birth of a royal princess to their ancient and dwindling tribe in four centuries.

She would not run. Roseâtre braced her legs. She ignored her thin, negligible attire and lack of armor. She allowed the tempest brewing in her soul to glow in her hazel eyes.

"You're here to do a job, Mr. diNapoli." Frigid didn't begin to describe the tone she attempted. She strove to emulate her mother's legendary aloofness. Roseâtre didn't need to put up with the beast's behavior, even this handsome, sexy beast that left her insides damp and aching. "I suggest we get on with it."

"Oh, whatever you say, princess."

The bastard appeared more amused than cowed by her words as he stepped back, swept a bow and motioned her back to the stage.

With its litter of cats.

Spine erect, she strolled away from him, every step deliberate. His

gaze was a physical caress on her ass. She took her time and let him look.

And then let him weep.

Chapter Two

The princess was late.

It was their fourth "private" rehearsal time. After their first night, he'd settled for introducing her to each of the cats, encouraged her to run her long, nimble fingers over their silky coats and ignored the possessive surge of fur that writhed under his skin. His cat wasn't interested in watching her pet others, much less the meek and submissive cats under his command.

Anthony diNapoli interlaced his fingers behind his back and bent in a long stretch, palms facing the ceiling. The muscles in his shoulders burned from the pull, until one by one, his vertebrae popped, easing his stress. The relief was instantaneous. His gaze flickered to the stage with impatience. It was too bad he couldn't relieve other issues as simply.

But Anthony kept it under control.

Miss Roseâtre might be a showgirl now, but she still carried the smell of bronze blades inherent to her race.

Amazon.

He could hardly believe his luck. The sting of losing to his uncle had left him alone and without a Pride in a world hostile to lone shifters. It required delicate negotiation and the backing of a strong group to travel through warring territories without offense.

Anthony possessed neither the skill for negotiation nor the backing of a Pride. So he was forced to beg, borrow and steal the goodwill of others to sponsor his travels. That meant he must cross some territories in hours or pay an exorbitant amount in tithe to those Packs and Prides where he worked.

The Arcana Royale was neutral territory. Anthony need pay nothing to the Pack controlling the Las Vegas territory nor a tribute to its reigning vampire prince, as long as he remained within the confines of the casino property. The casino had even negotiated his travel arrangements. The casino boasted everything he could need: income, sanctuary, and with the amount of power they controlled, significant perks like his suite. The gambling didn't interest him, nor did the tourists and other paranormals. He wanted a home for his cats, and time. His job provided him with both. It was altogether satisfactory. Except for one self-entitled princess.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the distant sound of expensive shoes *click-clacking* against concrete announced her impending arrival. He straightened, taking the time to scratch Nalini's neck.

The maternal female was of a slighter build and boasted the only dark eyes of all his handpicked Pride members. A sweet female, Nalini

could set even the most high-strung audience member at ease. A domesticated pet housed in the body of a feral predator.

As if sensing his concern, Nalini butted her head under his hand, stroking her cheek against the rough denim of his leg, scent marking him, demonstrating solidarity, affection and affinity. She never challenged his authority in human or cat form.

If only he could domesticate the princess as easily.

Roseâtre needed to practice sliding her lithe, long body down the back of a cat tonight and despite the blood roaring in his ears, Anthony knew it was better to rehearse with Nalini.

For now.

The Amazon-turned-showgirl seemed to have timed her entrance, appearing from the shadows wrapping the back of the stage. Her black leotard molded every sensuous curve and highlighted the smooth, long torso from the swell of her breasts to the roundness of her hips. His immediate erection applauded her supple form, but his mind rebelled at the black.

Always black.

The woman needed to dress in richer, warmer tones that would give color to her pale, soft flesh. He pictured her in Earth tones that brought out the flickers of green in her hazel eyes or jeweled sheaths that he could unwrap, inch by silken inch, to explore her creamy skin.

He allowed his gaze to rake over her, appreciating the clean, easy lines of her posture as she strolled across the stage. No. She owned the stage and allowed it the grace of her presence.

Her feet glittered and sparkled. He lifted both brows, curious and amused by yet another pair of shoes. Her boring black leotard might be the same night after night, but the shoes were always different. High heels decked out with shiny baubles and smelling of cold, hard diamonds and gems.

“Good evening.” Her voice was the cool winds of autumn brushing aside the drizzling heat of summer.

“You’re late, princess.” Irritated by his own reaction, he nudged Nalini aside and stood.

“I’m well, thank you. And how are you?” She paused a few feet away, denying him access to her precious bubble.

Too bad.

He closed the distance between them in three long strides, prowling around her. The heels added inches to her height, but he was the largest male born to his Pride. He understood the advantage of size and exploited it.

“Lose the shoes, princess.”

“Why?”

So easy to bait. He opened his mouth, letting the scent of her wash

across his teeth, brush his gums and coat his throat. He savored the hints of sage, paprika and oregano tinged with the bite of bronze. Her long, sinuous figure was crowned with a cascade of deep black hair. He wondered what the sunlight would bring out in the dark mass, set off by a single lock of silvery white that fell from her center part to caress her right cheek.

"Because you need to be able to work your body along her back. The heels will hurt her." Enticed, he caught the end of the white streak and rolled it between his fingers. It was as soft as the downy fur on the belly of any of his tigers.

A single white streak, amongst all the dark and cream.

"Stop that." She slapped his hand, but her words broke in the center on a huff of breath.

Annoyed or aroused? He sampled a lungful of her scent and smiled. *Definitely aroused.*

He longed to flex his claws, but settled for curling his toes against the hard wood of the stage floor. Ignoring her earlier rebuff, he twined the white lock over two fingers and ducked his head down to run his nose over it.

It smelled different from the rest of her. Elements of mint, apricot, fig and date jostled together, creating an enticing fruity mixture.

Why is this so different from the rest of her?

No stink of bronze to bite at the back of his throat. No shimmers of desert winds luring him in to an oasis trap. Amazons crossed the Ural Mountains over the centuries, hunting his people for their pelts and coats. His great-grandfather served as a battle cape for their great queen.

He'd even seen the bitch wearing it on television.

So why did his princess smell of sweet, succulent fruits on these wickedly different strands of hair?

A shiver of motion and cool metal burned against the muscles of his thigh. He spared a glance downward. A silver spike, easily three inches long, pressed into the denim dangerously close to his groin. *Where'd she hide that?* His cock swelled at the challenge.

"Does my princess want to play?" Anthony's chest expanded, his eyes narrowed as they drifted up the length of her. Close enough that the odd, icy warmth of her body teased and tingled the bare flesh of his chest and arms.

He almost wished he'd forgone the jeans. The silver spike pressed forward, digging into his flesh enticingly. He tugged the lock of hair, a schoolboy's salute of appreciation, before releasing it. One hand plunging between them, to immobilize her wrist, Anthony wrapped his free arm around her middle to drag her against him.

His erection strained against his jeans, tormented by the press of

soft flesh to his front. Anthony gazed down at her startled expression with amusement. A fleeting amusement as it turned out. She simply fell back over his arm, her legs twisting between his and hooking the backs of his knees.

Anthony rolled, attempting to take the brunt of the fall on his side and shield her, while keeping her vicious little spike from emasculating him. But his princess wasn't done. No sooner had he shot an arm out to catch them, than he tumbled head over ass to land flat on his back, the princess straddling him.

The heat at the apex of her thighs burned into his chest as her knees dug into his forearms. The silver spike jutted threateningly at the soft skin of his exposed throat, forcing his head up.

"You know, princess, if you wanted to ride me, all you had to do was ask." He grinned at the combination of lust and outrage racing like storm clouds over her features, wrinkling her nose, softening her lips and tightening her jaw.

Damn, she would be fun in bed.

With just an ounce of regret, he shoved up with his arms and dead lifted her weight, sending her flying over his head. Anthony bounded to his feet with a rolled push of his shoulders. He threw a hand out to keep Nalini still. The white tiger watched the wrestling with bored disinterest.

Roseâtre hit the stage with her shoulder and rolled to her feet, wobbling on her spiky little heels. A misfortune for his princess. Since the unsteadiness threw off her balance, he pounced. He plucked the spike from her fingers and tossed it off the stage to clatter on the floor of the empty orchestra pit.

They went down in a pile of arms and legs. He scissored her knees together with his own, his hands forcing her arms to the stage. Unsurprisingly, his strength was more than capable of grappling with hers. When her teeth snapped at his face, the cat inside slipped its leash.

He dropped his head to her throat and bit down gently, tasting the warm salt of her cool skin. Just hard enough to bruise, not tear. Delight speared him. Her writhing hips halted when he pressed the evidence of his arousal against her belly.

With the lightest of shakes, he let her get used to the danger of the man at her throat until the stiffness in her shoulders released. The relaxation of her body was a ploy. He spared a look up the curve of her jaw. He couldn't quite make out her face, but he could almost smell the mutiny boiling within.

Her hands flexed, the muscles in her arms jerked in response. He tightened his grip. Amazons didn't surrender. If he allowed her even an ounce of freedom, she would strike. Anthony held her firm,

refusing to yield the advantage. The scent of her fed his burning desire to stroke his tongue against her flesh, to taste the sweet and the tart.

If she wants submission, she'll damn well give it first.

Roseâtre's hips bumped his and he growled, a low sound vibrating out of his throat. He longed to see her face, to see the expression in those hazel eyes. *Was that an invitation?*

The press of cold steel to the back of his neck and Nalini's lazy growl told him the truth.

It was a distraction.

"Let her go, or I'll take your head off." The masculine warning was reinforced with the bite of steel into the soft juncture at the base of Anthony's skull.

Reluctantly, Anthony obeyed, releasing Roseâtre's throat but keeping his head still lest the blade penetrate his spine and sever it. Such a brutal injury could take years to heal, if it ever did.

"Nalini." Anthony spoke the words in a gentle command, knowing the cat would back him up.

"…is smart enough to see the gun pointing at her and isn't moving. Remember that when I allow you to stand, Mr. diNapoli. Now get off Roseâtre."

Anthony's biceps flexed. He waited for the blade's pressure to ease before lifting his head to see Roseâtre's sexy little mouth pinched into a smirk. She had the upper hand.

For now.

He rose carefully, aware of the blade and shifted away. He held out a hand to Roseâtre and to his utter surprise, she took it, allowing him to pull her to feet. She moved away from him, creating a gulf between them before the blade dropped from the back of his head. A sheath peeked up from the back seam of her leotard. That explained where she'd hid the slender spike. Glancing to his right, Anthony frowned.

The man gazing at him was of slender build with salt-and-pepper hair and almost kind eyes. He also held a wicked little Beretta in his hand and it was indeed pointed at Nalini.

"Do we understand each other, Mr. diNapoli?" The low threat hung in the syllables of the question. The man was curiously lacking in social scents.

No scent of soap. No scent of cologne. It was unnerving. It also explained the stealth of his approach. Intrigue warred with irritation, but the gun was a danger he couldn't ignore.

"We do." Anthony bowed his head slightly and the man paid him a similar favor. "And you are?"

The gun lowered and Nalini yawned, clearly no worse for wear from the potential threat.

“Thank you, Stan.” Roseâtre clued him in to the stranger’s identity.

“You’re welcome. I’ll return to my seat now if the two of you can behave.” Surprisingly, Stan gave Roseâtre a look of mild censure. “Heidi has been disappointed at how slowly this is going. You need to get over this inhibition.”

“It’s not my fault tall, blond and studly attacked me.”

Studly. Anthony smiled. He could work with that.

“Of course it isn’t and I didn’t see you draw a weapon on him first. Make this work, Roseâtre.” The man picked up the weapon in question and exited the stage with a gentle leap. Anthony’s gaze followed him until the shadows of the audience tables swallowed him up. Just how long had this *Stan* been watching their rehearsals? He’d been told the dancers had a guardian who looked after them, who traveled with them when they left the theatre, but he’d never met or seen him until now.

“Ugh.” The pure frustration in the syllable nudged him. He swung his gaze back to Roseâtre.

“What’s the problem now, princess?”

“You drooled on me.”

Laughter purred through him.

“Shall we have a truce then?”

“A truce?” Skepticism knitted her brows.

“Yes, a peace accord. An agreement to work together toward a mutual goal without eviscerating each other?”

“So I don’t poke you and you don’t poke me?”

Oh, no. There will be poking.

“How about I promise not to bite?” Anthony stretched, aware of her gaze roaming over him, and too much of a cat not to preen at the attention. Silver spike and wrestling match aside, he wanted to play out this game between them.

“Hmm, so I don’t poke you and you don’t bite me?”

He grinned slowly. This truce had benefits worth exploring. “Yes, but please feel free to bite me anytime you want me to poke you.”

Chapter Three

Heidi has been disappointed at how slowly this is going. You need to get over this inhibition.

Stan's warning echoed in Roseâtre's mind for two days. Every time the blond god demanded she wrap her body around one of his tigers, she'd forced away her repugnance. The silky stroke of fur rolling over powerful muscles served as a potent reminder of the inherent danger present in the animals she was supposed to *make love* to on the stage.

Make love.

Talk about getting in bed with your enemies. Her mother would be furious. But then her mother had no idea where Roseâtre had gone. She could have called her…in the beginning. But she didn't. This was her failure to protect, so it was hers to correct. Calling her for help now would be admitting defeat.

The sun descended below the horizon in the world beyond the casino, rousing Roseâtre from the gray hours of repose enforced upon all the showgirls as a part of their contract with the casino. For many, it was the curse of having no soul.

For Roseâtre, the lease she'd submitted to in order to stay with Cerveau enforced it. A contract her shield-sister was unaware of, and would remain so for the term of their servitude. Cerveau hadn't been herself in all the years of their services. Some part of her disappeared that day, she never questioned Roseâtre's decisions or argued about her presence.

A quick shower, change of clothing, and Roseâtre made her way through the dark underground from the dancers' quarters to the long flight of concrete steps leading up to the Midnight Mystery Lounge's stage. Every night for six nights, she'd been forced to endure *extra* rehearsals. Three to four hours of time spent solely in the company of Anthony and his damned cats.

Lickable abs or not, the man was as infuriating as his cats. *But only because you want to mount him on that stage and slide all over his gorgeous body.* The primitive need to mate was as ancient as the world, an option not easily explored. Before Heidi assigned her to this purgatory, she could at least pretend to enjoy the casino and resort beyond their dark little theatre…but she may as well be marooned with the man and his *cats* for all that she got to see of it anymore.

Who am I kidding? I'm not the one who sneaks out to play in the casino. That's Kiki.

Her heels snapped noisily on the stairs. She'd have to take them off when she arrived at the stage. The bastard refused to let her wear

them, particularly her silver-tipped Pradas.

A sigh tugged loose from her throat and she paused at the top of the stairs. The constant mental and emotional warfare they engaged in should leave her invigorated.

Not exhausted.

Not frustrated.

Not aching.

Closing her eyes, she placed her hand on the cool metal of the door handle. It was time to wrap the illusion of Roseâtre more firmly around herself. She needed to strengthen her mantle of leadership, the burden of authority and the attitude of command. She was the Princess Ruth Ann of Macedonia, princess royal of the House Alexiares, a descendant of Hera.

The *princess* was a warrior and could face any battle. Even that of the white tigers, the Amazons' most ancient and mortal of enemies. So if she was to perform with them, she needed to be Roseâtre, not Ruth Ann.

It mattered little that she was about to debase herself, for a princess would do all that was necessary to ensure the safety and the sanctity of her people. Her people, which currently consisted only of Cerveau, deserved the royal sanctuary inherent to Roseâtre's bloodline.

So she would debauch with the tigers. She would stretch sinuously across their backs, serve herself up as the submissive slave girl to be seduced. But she would ever be the princess. She would never sacrifice her personal pride.

The stage was dark, illuminated by one muddy light from the rafters. At the edge of the stage, she slid her feet out of the gold, glittering pumps Pandora left. It was the first time she'd worn Pandora's prized gift. A gift that conferred not only the nymph's leading role in the show, but the assumption of her burdens.

Roseâtre would not let her adopted Tribe down.

Barefoot, she padded across the silent stage. It was unusual not to find Anthony waiting for her, his arrestingly beautiful face twisted into a frown of disapproval. Censure and admonishment coupled in his words when he decried her lateness.

And she was late. Nearly fifteen minutes so.

Controlling her arrival time was all that was left to her. She would wrap her fingers through the reins of time and hold them tautly.

Where the hell is Anthony?

Her gaze skated over the stage. The silence hung in the air like a thick, heavy curtain in the unrelieved shadows around the spotlight. *Perhaps Anthony is tired of the games. Or better, maybe someone kicked*

his ass out of the Arcana Royale.

The pleasant thought was interrupted by a bump of regret, a curious twisting sensation in her belly. *Shame?*

No.

Disappointment.

The honest, strange emotion curled through her, pins and needles of ice and heat. She'd dreaded seeing his smug arrogance. Yet she couldn't wait to drink in the raw, primal beauty that made up his body.

The mass of contradiction knotted within her chest until her heart was left to thump in the uncomfortably small space that remained.

Where is he?

Hands on her hips, Roseâtre surveyed the stage. She saw no great tigers lounging. No flicker of movement betraying her tormentor's location. She swallowed the urge to call out, to request his presence.

The lonely silence was punctured by the low, distant thump of a drum. A solitary cadence. A heartbeat of sound intoned against the backdrop of a throatier saxophone. The music of their show, *Seduction of a Maiden*.

Even the title sent shivers cascading down her spine. The storyline called for the tiger to stalk her in the darkness. A flicker of movement drew her to the side of the stage. In the darkness, a tail twitched.

Her heart thudded, a fist bumped against her ribs. The scent of moisture warned her of the misty vapor rolling onto the stage. The great tiger hunted in the primal mist, searching for the forbidden maiden, determined to make her its mate.

Unease spiked in her blood. The great, white tiger prowled from the darkness. The throbbing music thudded against her skin. The maiden was supposed to be innocent yet coy. Aware of her allure yet naive to the depraved desire that sent the tiger on the hunt.

Anthony must have taken a page from Stan's book and planted himself in the darkened lounge to watch the show.

The tiger continued to wind through the mist, appearing and disappearing, his masculine threat enhanced by the fluidity of his movements.

And this cat was definitely a *he*.

Despite working with a female all week, the show demanded the presence of the male cat, the sheer size and masculinity vital to the performance.

Fine. If the bastard wanted to watch, let him watch.

Stretching her arms up to the ceiling, she was rewarded by a pour of misty, cool vapor. The sound of running water splashed against the backdrop of the pulsating music. The jungle waterfall, the sanctuary of

the forbidden maiden, was the opening scene.

Roseâtre curled into the roll, bowing down to the imaginary pool and cupping it with her hands. She lifted her arms to pour the water over her head. Her palms turned to the faux sky of the stage rafters as she stretched.

The scene opened at dawn.

The time of awakening.

The half-forgotten sun a distant promise on the horizon. The muddy gray light tinged to red with hues of orange. The Chariot of Apollo beginning his lazy charge to claim the day, spearing the sanctity of Artemis's milk-white light and chasing away the shadows of Phoebe's blanket of stars, the mystical and wondrous world of intellect, for the animalistic needs of day.

Roseâtre rolled her hips, letting her muscles stretch by degrees and go lax. She was free of the burdens of leadership and the eyes of others. Free to revel in the state of a natural goddess.

The show called for nudity and she paused in her imagined water play to strip the black leotard from her shoulders, urging it down until it pooled at her feet.

A light kick sent it swishing away in the darkness.

Leaving her alone. Vulnerable. Innocent.

The cadence of the music shifted, a subtle increase to the drums. The deep, pounding bass alerting the audience that danger lurked all around the maiden, but Roseâtre embraced the part, playing her role and dancing into the misty vapor. Unaware. Untouched. Unprepared.

The slide of a tail along her bare thigh surprised the maiden. The intimacy incited a startled desire from both the maiden and the woman playing her part. Wild, unrepentant heat flooded her body and she dropped to crouch against the stage, bare breasts pressed to her biceps as she covered herself, modest and inhibited.

As though parted by the hands of fate, the great tiger strode out of the shadows. The red and orange hues of the stage lights brightened, illuminating the silver white of the beast's body.

Clinging to her role out of desperation, Roseâtre lifted her head and met the tiger's hungry gaze.

They were at eye level. And he was huge.

It had to be her imagination, but she could swear the deep blue eyes were hot with lust and intrigue. They roamed over her, demanding and assessing.

The tiger *wanted*.

The racing cadence of throbbing drums stopped, leaving only the splash of water behind a lonely flute to serenade their character's first encounter. Roseâtre's maiden peeked from the water, to gaze at her solitary audience as he posed magnificently on the shore.

And by the gods was he magnificent.

Ancient enemies or not, this male would command the attention of even the most aged of the Amazons. Virile. Strong. Powerful.

Desire.

Roseâtre discovered that the maiden's intoxication was not hard to fabricate. She edged forward, extending her arm, baring her nakedness to the hard heat in those blue eyes.

Fire blossomed in her belly, flaring into a bonfire of raw, aching need that spread, consuming every inhibition against submitting to this lord of the jungle. But in this moment, on this stage, in this play, the maiden, seduced by curiosity, would expose her nakedness.

After all, the tiger was merely a creature of the jungle. Not a man.

The Amazon in her approved of the idea. Approved so much that Roseâtre could barely discern the purely feminine desire entangled with the innocence of the maiden she was supposed to be playing.

As if impatient with her slow approach, the tiger eased forward, head butting against her hand. His whiskers stroked her palm as his head rolled against her fingers.

The role forgotten, Roseâtre stroked the noble brow, feathered over the satiny softness of his ears. Intrigued by the invitation, the tiger continued to crowd closer, until his great face rubbed against her cheek.

A shudder of pure, undiluted lust speared through her. She climbed to her knees, allowing the tiger to rub gently against her chest and the fur rasping over her nipples was electric. She couldn't help the sharp gasp, the jerk of inner muscles squeezing against an imagined thrust.

The maiden wanted to feel the soft, silky fur pressing against her most intimate places.

And so did Roseâtre.

The forbidden craving flowed through her as she stroked her hands along his head to his shoulders. His fur caressed her skin, tormented her nipples and excited her sex. For the first time, Roseâtre discovered that sliding her leg over the creature's magnificent back wasn't accompanied by the arrested sensation of wariness.

The great beast stilled as she arched her leg into the air, the music rose in a slow, primitive aria. The prolonged movement, a drawn-out, stop-motion of consuming desire. Her toes pointed to the rafters and she held the pose, arms wrapped around the silken heat sheathing the beast. Her sex ached for the promised contact.

Everything paused.

Somewhere, beneath the burning fire lapping at her mind, she thought the tiger was holding its breath. With agonizing slowness that sent teasing tingles of pleasure racing across her skin, she rolled her

body onto the cat's back. They'd practiced this for a week, the descent of her leg, the curling of her torso, until she nearly draped herself against the tiger's back.

They held this position, her sex poised, just out of reach until he surged upward, a thrust of such wild muscle that his fur scraped her sensitive nub. The scent of snow and pine filled her lungs. He smelled delicious.

And then he purred.

The low rumbling vibration pulsed through her and she forgot the music, the show and the audience as a fierce orgasm stole through her body and she arched upward, stretching her arms to the sky, legs locked around his back.

Absolute harmony and pleasure rippled through her. In that moment, she became one with the great beast.

Chapter Four

Anthony pushed his face into the bucket of icy water waiting in the backstage quiet. They'd repeated the opening dance twice more, neither as intoxicatingly seductive as the first. The need to shift beneath her, to roll her onto the stage and drive himself into her, maddened him until he'd abandoned the stage, satisfied with the performance, inflamed by the success.

The princess's submission was an act, he reminded himself. All an act designed to seduce the audience, not him. The pain of shifting, jerking bone and muscle out of their customary positions and reforming from cat to man hadn't diminished the surges of lust. Sweat coated his chest. The stage's cool vapor tasted bitter in his mouth but failed to dilute the musky scent of her desire lingering on his flesh.

Straightening, he seized a towel to blot away the water and strode back onto the stage. Denim rasped against his skin. He hated wearing clothes so soon after a shift. They chafed, irritating the sensitized flesh. But if he strode out there naked, not even her sword-wielding bodyguard would be much of a defense against his passion.

His stride faltered. Roseâtre sat on her knees, center stage. Her hands rested on her thighs. A damp sheen of perspiration and dry ice vapor coated her pale skin, creating a sensation of glitter in the murky lights left from the performance.

She was once again dressed in the body-snugging black leotard. His cock jerked. Annoyance flared. He wanted to rip the offending color off her. He wanted to feast his human eyes on the gorgeous sensuality that so enraptured his cat.

As if aware of his presence, she lifted her head to look at him, the pale streak of white and silver glowing against the backdrop of black hair. His gaze narrowed on her chest, the swift rise and fall, before lifting to study her flushed features and the glassy shimmer in her eyes.

"Nice orgasm, princess?" The words slipped out before he could stop them. The scent of her taunted him, an evocative mixture of jungle fruits, summer sky and autumn crispness. There was no word for her ambrosia-flavored desire.

The cat surged within him, claws raking through his insides. The tiger was pleased with her reactions, pure masculine delight that he'd been able to drive her to such satisfaction. The man wanted to taste that satisfaction, to sample it and drive her screaming until she had no other thoughts.

No thought save for him.

"Best I've ever had. Jealous?" The tart response increased the

sweet flavor of her scent.

Hell yes, I'm jealous of my cat. But he kept that ironic confession to himself, stalking forward on silent feet. She rose in a single fluid motion, wariness etched under her flushed pleasure.

"You need to work on your timing." He prowled around her, not quite trusting himself to approach her directly. He had to grip his hands into fists to keep from trailing fingers over the silky hair, to lean in close and sample the musky flavor of her scent, or better, to glide his tongue along the trails of moisture dripping down the V of her leotard.

Is it salty? Or is it sweet?

"I think my timing is excellent. Your cat is impatient and doesn't wait the full eight count before he surges against me. He nearly knocked me down the last time." Acerbic wit strung between the words.

Does she know? He paused, mid step, to study her face. Rebellion tightened her jaw, pride squared her shoulders and force of will held her spine erect.

Want.

The purely base desire didn't surprise him this time. He'd wanted her from the moment he'd glimpsed her arriving for that first rehearsal, laughter flowing around her like a billowing cape, captivating her audience.

The cat didn't have a problem with her at all. He purred with anticipation of the hunt, the capture and the mating. Her fierce reactions on the stage stoked his lust.

Next time, he wanted to see her face as orgasm took her.

And the time after that.

His cock hardened painfully.

"Are you going to deal with it?" Her question thrust through the haze of desire coating his thoughts. His body was eager to do just that. Deal with the cascade of lust swirling around them.

"His timing is fine," he managed, addressing the earlier question. "We may have to change it to a six count. It's that hesitation you insist on. You can't beckon and then not quite touch."

"But isn't that the point of the show?" Her arms folded under her sweet breasts, forcing the twin globes up until they promised to pop the fabric.

His gaze settled on them. Would they flush with heat when he caressed them? Would her nipples pucker when his beard glided over them? Despite all her earlier objections, he'd smelled the passion created by his tail sliding over her skin. She loved the feeling of his fur.

"The point of the show is the maiden submits to the tiger. She

gives herself up to his pleasure. She doesn't hold herself aloof, untouchable and she doesn't show timidity."

"Timidity?" Roseâtre strangled on the word, the sheen of lazy satisfaction hardening to anger.

Anthony's lips curled upward. *Gotcha, princess.* "Timidity. She's innocent. She's untouched. She's provocative. But she isn't timid. She isn't afraid of the cat."

"The maiden is far from timid. The pause is for effect, so the audience has time to absorb her exaggerated reactions, to anticipate it. Will she reach out? Will she allow her hand to touch him? Will she risk the possible loss of life and limb to indulge a foolish fetish to stroke *a cat*?" Roseâtre bounced on the balls of her feet. Without her ridiculously unstable heels, she was slighter than he, barely reaching his chin. But the lack of height made her no less formidable.

"Her *foolish fetish*, as you call it, is the nascent innocence of a girl unjaded by worldly prejudice." He prowled closer, forcing her to tilt her head back to gaze up at him. It was petty, using his size to his advantage.

Petty but effective.

"What prejudice could she possibly have? She's sheltered, hidden away, secured for her own good. The tiger is the interloper, thrusting himself into her world, filling her mind with forbidden thoughts and needs." Her voice rose on the last note, her nimble fingers punctuating each word. "The tiger is impatient, pushing and demanding."

"He wants her." Anthony's voice went low. "It's curiosity that brings him to that oasis, but what he sees, he *wants*."

"Wanting and having are two different things." Roseâtre's ire crashed against him.

"Yes, they are." To his delight, her pink tongue flickered over her lips, moistening them. Her face was flushed with the heat of their argument, her scent shifting subtly. His nostrils flared. *Her desire was back*.

"So what are you going to do about it?" The double entendre of her question wasn't lost on him. Anthony recognized the challenge, and the beast within him rose to accept it.

"This," he answered succinctly, snaking his arms around her, closing the gap to pull her against his body. Her soft, slender and fragile appearance belied a deeper strength, her body honed to the finest of weapons. He allowed her a single inhalation as his hands slid into that cascade of night-colored hair and his lips slanted over hers. Her teeth closed, denying him entry.

He ignored the tacit refusal, settling for the slow massage of lip upon lip, goading her with gentle flicks of his tongue. Her rigid body softened, but her hands remained at her sides. He worked his way

from one corner of her mouth to the other. The loosening of her jaw relaxed him and he settled in to nuzzle.

When her hands curled up to his biceps, a throaty growl of masculine satisfaction vibrated his throat. Her teeth parted, an invitation. Anthony didn't dare try his tongue against the wicked sharpness, continuing the slow friction of his lips on hers.

Her nails dug into his skin, scoring against the haze of desire draping him, and he firmed her body against his, thrusting a leg between hers, allowing her weight to settle against his jean-clad thigh. The fabric rasped against his skin, denying him the more satisfyingly intimate contact.

Her mouth parted fully and her tongue slid against his lips. Fire kindled in his blood, racing along to every extremity. He tormented her tongue with his own, stroking it, requesting, and then demanding admission. Her head tilted back farther, her hips rolling, rubbing herself against his thigh. He clenched the muscle, allowing her the pleasure.

The woman in his arms was no maiden. She was pure, unadulterated seductress. She enticed, she tormented and she satisfied. His cock strained against the denim, desperate for more than the teasing brush of her heat as she rode his thigh.

Her hands left his biceps, stroking across his shoulders. A glimmer of cool metal stung against the heat of her hands, but the long, sensuous caresses both riled and settled the beast inside of him. He forgot the flash of curiosity. The stage around them winked out. All that mattered was the princess sampling him, surrounding him, surrendering to him.

Anthony purred.

The soft, supple woman in his arms went stiff. Her head jerked back, forcing him to release her hair or hurt her. Her desire-drenched gaze slashed against him.

"*By the gods…*" The invective a low, throaty hum. "*You're* the tiger."

He smiled, the cat arching its back, proud to be acknowledged, that she knew her master.

So intoxicated by the promise of her surrender, he didn't see the danger of her head arching back until she snapped it forward to slam into his forehead. Stars dotted his vision, pain burned through his nostrils and his grip loosened. She dropped from his thigh, hitting the stage with her hands and snapping her leg to sweep his legs out in a humiliating fall. Only his reflexes landed him on his knees, preventing the shame of being dropped on his ass.

As one, they surged to their feet. His cock protested the shift, but he had no time to acknowledge it as her next blow came for him.

Anthony barely lifted an arm in time to absorb the shock of her fist. She used an old style of hand combat, one used for generations by her people and his.

The only docile Amazon is a dead one.

Laughter rolled up from his chest and he knew when he chuckled, he pushed her final button. Her expression was deadly. Pure fury burned in her gaze, her cheeks bloomed with color, and her desire fueled her rage.

She struck with precision, every blow designed to incapacitate and injure. He blocked, the cat refusing to strike back. They crossed the stage, his avenging angel in pursuit, violence bringing the doll to life.

He loved it.

When her knee slammed into his thigh, he shifted to grappling, closing the space between them lest she get the leverage required to totally emasculate him. The cat surged under his skin, keeping his grip firm, but not brutal.

His mate wouldn't be harmed.

Mate? The cat had taken the Amazon for a mate?

The thought shocked Anthony into stillness, and he didn't see the elbow that caught him high against his right eyebrow. Darkness clouded his vision and he stumbled down to one knee, barely catching her second snap-kick by grabbing her ankle. With some regret, he twisted, turning the force of her motion against her, and she spun in the air and slammed against the stage.

Within seconds, they were both up again. Roseâtre raced toward him, his death in her eyes.

"Hold!"

Chapter Five

"Hold!" The command ricocheted through the bloodlust clouding Roseâtre's vision. A sharp, shooting pain flared around her wrists, emphasizing the command until her fists jerked open and her knees collapsed. She crashed to the stage, just two feet from the man—no, the tiger—she'd allowed the blasphemy of seduction.

Short, fast steps clicked across the stage. That Heidi allowed Rose to hear her approach was a distant show of respect.

Very distant.

Anthony's lust-filled gaze roamed over her face, a turbulent storm of emotion illuminating every feature. Heavy brows drew together as his gaze rose from her to the woman bearing down on them. Roseâtre knew Heidi was behind her, but the command—an indelible imprint on her soul—held her firm.

The enchanted shackles on her wrists burned. Normally invisible to the naked eye, magic flared where the slave bands held.

She would hold.

Until she was released.

If she was released.

"What the hell do you both think you're doing?" Heidi appeared in her peripheral vision.

"Rehearsing." Anthony's answer was ridiculous, yet at the same time, it echoed with honesty.

"Really?" Unfortunately, Heidi didn't believe him any more than Roseâtre did. "Roseâtre?"

She panted, the Amazon warrior within her scrabbling against the bands of authority and submission. She'd allowed herself to be shackled. There was no shame in the gold-embossed manacles securing each wrist.

"He's a were," she confessed the source of her sin. The shackles allowed nothing but honesty. "I was trying to kill him."

Anthony's gaze was a visceral scrape across her skin. He shook his head, a gesture that was both surprisingly comforting and catlike in the same moment. "We were playing." His interruption was unexpected and unwelcome.

Allowing his lies to protect her from punishment would be an unforgivable stain on her honor.

"Are you sure?" Heidi squatted down until she was eye level with Roseâtre, the force of the hold command securing the Amazon to the stage. Her docile position a demand of the shackles, a willing concession to the oath she'd sworn.

"Yes. He actually tried to seduce me. But he's a were. Worse, he's

a weretiger."

Heidi sighed, a soft, breathy whisper of regret.

"She didn't try to kill me." Anthony was on his feet now, the sheen of his gold skin reflecting the overhead lights. The muscles rippled across his shoulders as he extended his arms. "Bruises. No wounds."

The stage manager spared Roseâtre a rueful look. "I am sorry, Roseâtre, but reparations must be made."

"You will *not* punish her." The budding threat in the weretiger's throaty vocals sent an impermissible flux of lust through her being. Was the cat seriously trying to protect her?

Given a few more moments, she would have tried to separate his head from his shoulders.

Or left him neutered.

The combination of betrayal and protection made her head ache.

"Or what?" Heidi stood now, facing down the tower of angry cat in male form. How had Roseâtre never seen it before? Forced to study him from beneath her lashes, her body locked until Heidi saw fit to free her, she couldn't imagine him as anything but the great white tiger.

His vivid blue eyes were rounded, inner eyelids blinking over slender slits of black. Cat eyes.

She'd closed her thighs over his back and reveled in the feeling of his fur against her most intimate areas. The *verboten* exposure to the feline species was bad enough.

To a weretiger. It was an unimaginable betrayal to her tribe, her mother and, most of all, to herself.

Her mother would flay the skin from her back until no animal-caressed part of her remained.

Still. "Don't." Roseâtre couldn't believe she was warning off the tiger. Confronting the stage manager wasn't a healthy occupation. Despite her less than formidable appearance, Heidi maintained a collection of puzzle boxes in her office, dating to all periods of history. Rumors abounded that each puzzle box served as a cage for some poor, unfortunate soul who pissed Heidi off.

Worse, the stories told of the victims within the puzzle boxes, reduced to action-figure size and serving as toys for Heidi's talkative minion, a demonic little imp that followed her like a chattering child.

"I won't allow her to punish you." Anthony's words washed over her, cool air drifting in from the water, supplanting the hard heat of the day. The show of solidarity was as ridiculous as it was unexpected.

And thrilling.

Admit it. You like it, the nasty little voice in her mind taunted. But that voice was a product of her time in the Midnight Mystery Lounge

and clashed angrily with the Amazon princess, buried, half-forgotten in the sands of boredom and repetitive life.

She ached for just five more minutes. But five minutes of passion or battle? The two desires seemed intertwined.

"You allow or prevent nothing," Heidi responded, prim, cold, immovable.

Take a hint, Anthony. She's meaner than you are.

"If I'm the alleged victim of her attack and I say it didn't happen, then there's nothing to deal with. We still have two hours of rehearsal left."

But, of course, the cat didn't take the hint.

Men.

"She has admitted her intentions. I have already had one report from Stan regarding pulling you off her. Now I find the two of you grappling again."

Anthony shrugged, but the motion belied a deeper stiffness in his posture. Roseâtre's eyes stung as she tried to watch what was happening, the force of lifting her eyelids and staring across the plane of her forehead sending spikes of pain into her brain.

Was Anthony really considering attacking the stage manager?

"We were rehearsing. It's a passionate performance. You're going to have to expect some skin on skin."

"Oh. Do tell?" The dry tone crackled with skepticism.

"Anthony, stop." Roseâtre couldn't believe it even as the words rolled off her tongue.

"So you want to be punished?" Flickers of irritation fanned the cat's hostility.

"No. But seeing you neutered by someone else isn't in my plans either."

Heidi laughed. It wasn't a friendly sound.

Roseâtre pushed her head up a spare inch, but it cost. The daggers of pain pressing into her skull slashed against her spine. She found Anthony staring at her, mutiny etched into every tense feature. Tears of agony threatened, but she held them off by sheer force of will.

She was a battle-trained warrior. She was a *princess*.

Crying wasn't built into her genetic code.

"Heidi, I'll submit to whatever punishment you deem fit." The words tasted like ash on her tongue. "Anthony defended himself. I attacked."

"I know you did." The statement stilled whatever fervent defense Anthony prepared. The cat scowled, thunderclouds darkening his blue irises. Heidi cut between them and gazed down at Roseâtre with a curious expression of regret. "We can't *afford* for the Overseers to notice this infraction."

The verbal slap stung. But Heidi was correct. The loss of Pandora echoed through the theatre, a subtle, brutal underscore to the theatre's already tenuous stability. Declining profits, bad reviews and desperation forced Heidi to hire Anthony and his cats in the first place.

The alternative was unthinkable.

"I understand."

"The new show opens in fourteen days." That was different. They'd only had a week before.

"Why the extension?"

"The Overseers will be hosting an event and their guests will be our audience. They have ordered the delay."

Roseâtre's stomach plummeted.

Not only could they not fail. They had to be spectacular. Or retribution would be swift and brutal.

Fortunately, she could heal from most injuries within fourteen days.

"We'll be perfect." And by the gods, they would be. If she had to debase herself to the cat every night for the foreseeable future, the show would be unforgettable.

"Wonderful." Heidi clucked approvingly and gestured with two fingers for Roseâtre to rise. The pain burrowing into her released immediately and she surged to her feet. Anthony sidestepped the stage manager, hovering closer.

Surprisingly the gaze he cast over her was tinged with concern. Filing the information away for inquiry later, she hoped he could keep his mouth shut before they dug their grave any deeper.

The shackles on her wrists were still warm, a burning reminder of the control Heidi exerted over her. The stage manager's rueful expression worried her more than Anthony's tongue. Particularly when Heidi tugged a chain holding a single golden key from around her neck.

Roseâtre froze.

Her soul pleaded. But Heidi's lips firmed into a thin, uncompromising line. She turned away from Roseâtre and faced Anthony.

She couldn't.

"Mr. diNapoli, as you are the victim of the assault…"

She wouldn't.

"…it is to you that Roseâtre's punishment shall fall. You will not scar her. You will not permanently injure her."

Roseâtre died a little inside.

"You will return her to my keeping as healthy as I pass her to you. But for the next fourteen days or less if you deem the punishment

to be complete, Roseâtre is yours."

She did.

Anthony stared down at the golden key in his palm. "You own her?"

"Yes." Succinct and direct. "And for now, so do you. Don't abuse the privilege." The stage manager nodded briskly, favoring Roseâtre with another mysterious yet regretful smile. "Try to behave. I'll inform Cerveau."

"But…" The word stole out of her before she could swallow the syllable.

"I'll take care of her. I promise." Heidi didn't give promises lightly, but the oath was as binding as any that Roseâtre had delivered through the years and she bowed her head in acceptance.

As quickly as she'd appeared, Heidi left. Anthony held the key in the palm of his hand. Conceivably, she could strike before he realized what it could do. She could take the key from his palm, reclaim her freedom and kill the cat.

And be banished for her temerity.

If she was lucky.

If she wasn't, Cerveau might pay an even heavier price.

Roseâtre squashed the longing within her, squaring her shoulders and raising her chin. She would take whatever punishment the cat could dish out. It was merely another battlefield to be faced.

To be conquered.

To be endured.

The end result would be the same. She would return to protect her shield-sister.

No other outcome was acceptable.

Anthony tossed the key and caught it, his gaze dark with speculation. "I don't suppose if I asked you what this did you would answer?"

"You have no reason to assume that, no." Roseâtre selected the words carefully.

"No, I don't." He studied the key, his nostrils flaring.

What did he smell? Our lessons indicated that cats were not the greatest of trackers, relying more on their sight and their reflexes than their sense of smell.

But she'd never observed one up close. Certainly not as close as they'd been when she'd straddled his leg.

Or as close as she'd wanted when she considered straddling the erection that thickened beneath his jeans. Heat ached between her thighs.

Unbelievable.

Even knowing exactly what he was didn't diminish her desire.

“But she said you were mine and this is a key. That implies ownership.” He asked no question, so Roseâtre kept her own counsel. His head tilted, still studying the key, he lifted it to his nostrils and inhaled a slow, deep breath.

“So the question is, what is this a key to?”

Unfortunately, Anthony chose that exact moment to look directly at her and Roseâtre lifted her hands, the gold shackles shimmering with warmth. A band of heat appeared around her throat and though she couldn’t see it, she knew it was a shining, golden collar, embossed in a language she had never understood.

“They go to these.”

Chapter Six

Anthony's chest expanded. The Amazon's shackles were cast from the finest spun gold. He couldn't help but prowl closer to inspect the bracelets that began at her wrists and extended to mid-forearm. The markings reminded him of gauntlets worn into battle, only without the mesh or gold to cover the hands and fingers.

Ignoring Roseâtre's sharp inhalation, he captured her fingers and turned her hand over. The language was indecipherable. It was neither Greek nor Hieratic. The lettering lacked the smooth bump and flow of Cyrillic.

But the key warmed in his palm when he brought it near the shackles, cooling when he held it away. Stealing a glance at her face, he brought the key closer. The heat was no greater than that found at the side of a pleasant fire, it didn't burn.

Wild hostility shimmered in Roseâtre's eyes, but her muscles were quiescent in contrast to the tightness around her mouth. His princess wasn't pleased by the turn of events. But what did it mean to have the key? He traced his fingers up her arm, delighting in the prickles appearing along her skin.

She could pretend all she liked, but his princess wasn't immune to him.

The cat purred in approval.

The collar, however, stopped both man and cat. It was a single, gold circlet clasped around her throat. No catch or securing device was readily apparent. In fact, it seemed to have been welded there, as much a part of her throat as a decoration.

The language on the collar shimmered, shifting and reforming. The strange letters transformed into something recognizable.

Anthony's name.

"Why does an Amazon allow herself to be chained in a slave collar?" There was no mistaking the collar or what it represented. The wrist shackles could have been decorative, but there was no other explanation for the collar. Who did he have to kill to win her freedom?

Or better, take possession of her himself?

"To protect her people, an Amazon would choose such a fate. There is little an Amazon wouldn't do to protect the women who follow her." The answer was hard won, pushed through gritted teeth. Anthony's gaze stroked over her speculatively. This close, he could taste the scent of her warm breath, the hint of cranberries, dates and just the faintest touch of coffee.

The past and the present filled his princess's lungs, an enchanting

creature, deadly and desirable. Anthony fisted his hand around the key.

"Tell me what the key does." He had a theory. He caressed her throat with his gaze, watching the muscles flex as she swallowed. She didn't want to tell. But she would.

"The key opens the bracelets and the collar."

The man wanted to laugh, but the cat arched its back, claws threatening to unsheathe into his closed fists. His princess was an Amazon warrior.

And a slave.

His slave, apparently, a gift of the stage manager for Roseâtre's alleged crime. The crime of striking out, warring with him, which was in her nature.

In his hand he held not only the key to her body, but the assurance of success in his future. The capture of an Amazon princess would raise his estimation amongst the Pride, allow him the honor of challenging the current Alpha.

He could kill his uncle and take back what should rightfully belong to him. The celebration would be magnificent and last for a full lunar cycle.

And the conquest of this sexy princess was his key to return to the life he'd been forced to abandon. She was a prized trophy, the finest spoil of war, and she would be his forever, bound in gold shackles, catering to his every whim.

His cock hardened painfully as the mental image of her on her hands and knees, head bowed in obeisance. He could taste her obedience on his tongue, but even as the thoughts aroused him, reality flamed through him.

Obedience was not submission.

Control was not dominance.

Slavery was not conquest.

He slid the key into his pocket. The stage manager gave him the vilest and most revered of boons. Roseâtre was his to do with as he pleased. He could take her as much and as often as he liked. Yet, they expected him to return her.

Too bad they're doomed to disappointment.

Cupping a hand around her neck, he brushed his thumb along her jaw. "Look at me."

Defiant hazel eyes rose until their gazes clashed. The tiger flexed his claws, but he refused to allow them to pierce the softness of her throat. Rebellion trembled on her lips. Her hands curled into fists. She wanted to strike him. She wanted to take him down, to continue their physical battle until one or both of them could lift an arm no longer.

Amazons didn't submit. They had to be taken.

"We're not done with rehearsal. Strip and we'll do it again."

He hid a smile at the surprise that blazed through her eyes. But he wasn't done. "While you dance, I want you to remember how you feel with your legs wrapped around my cat's back." His voice whispered against her cheek, his lips pressing the most chaste and simple of kisses to the corner of her eye.

"Think about how it feels when my cat surges between your thighs."

A convulsive swallow accentuated the shudder that ran through her. No, his Amazon was most definitely not immune. The musk of her arousal was nearly his undoing.

"And then remember, when you want me to do the same, you'll have to ask." Anger spiked through her arousal and Anthony laughed. His cat liked her bite. Her sharp claws. Her warrior's pride.

The man, he had to admit, wasn't adverse to any of them either. He slid his finger down to where the leotard hugged her shoulder. "Strip."

And she obeyed, her hot gaze promising retribution as she peeled away the offending black garment and dropped it on the stage. Between them.

Anthony should have retreated, allowed her that simple privacy. But he let his gaze feast even as he refused to allow his hands to roam the curves of her bared flesh. To shape her breasts and to tease the turgid nipples that tightened in the cool air.

It was his turn to swallow. The warmth of the key in his pocket burned against his thigh. She was perfection.

And if given even a sliver of opportunity, she was going to kill him.

This was going to be fun.

Three hours later, her body glistening with sweat, rehearsal was over. The cat adored rubbing up against her, allowing her to caress him, straddle him, drape across him. No matter how potent her arousal, Anthony saw no sign of retreat or surrender in his princess.

And they needed a break.

Surprisingly, none of the other dancers joined them and even the strange, gray-eyed watcher was absent from the audience. It would seem that Roseâtre really was left to his tender mercies. But despite her anger, her clear reluctance and the blazing promise for abuse he glimpsed in her eyes, she never held back. Their rehearsal had only grown more heated, more filled with abandon and, yes, she'd orgasmed the last time.

Again.

His cock was a painful reminder that despite her excitement, he remained unfulfilled. But a promise was a promise. He wouldn't take

her until she asked for it.

He'd left her naked and trembling to stride backstage and shift. The theatre was unbearably cold on his raw skin. He really was more of a masochist than he thought possible. Crushing her stolen leotard in his hand, he dressed in his jeans and joined her. They had hours yet till dawn and it was time to leave the theatre together.

But she wasn't wearing the damn black.

Not again.

He tossed the leotard into the trash and carried his own T-shirt back out. Not only was it the rich blue of the summer sky, it would smell of him. That would please the tiger and the man.

She was standing center stage when he returned, her long, bare legs gleaming with sweat. Her arms folded beneath the swell of her breasts. Even the nest of dark curls between her thighs seemed to torment him.

Damn, she was pretty.

"Put it on."

He threw the T-shirt, not bothering to hide his smile when it slapped at her chest. She caught it easily and scowled. But with the key warm in his pocket, he wasn't surprised when she obeyed. It draped her, more a dress than a shirt, with the hem striking her at mid thigh. She stretched one leg forward and propped her hands on her hips.

It was even more erotic than her nudity.

Now all he could think of was stripping it off, or better, rolling it up and driving into her until she wept.

Not until she asks for it.

He really was a glutton for punishment.

"Shall we?" He held out his hand.

The request, rather than an order, seemed to surprise his princess. The cat purred in approval. It was always better to keep prey off balance. He would make it an order, if he had to.

But he wanted *her* to want to go with him.

"Shall we, what?" Well, it wasn't an outright refusal.

"Shall we retire for the night? You're hungry and so am I. We can go to my suite—eat, relax and talk."

"And if I don't want to?"

The cat perked up, sensing the challenge. It wanted to bat at her resistance like a house cat did a ball of yarn until it unraveled every last layer.

"What would you like to do?"

It was the right question, because the mutiny in her expression faded to puzzlement. She didn't know what to do with him. He preferred it that way.

“I want you to give me the key.”

He paused, head canted to the right, as though considering her desire.

“Then come with me.”

“You’ll give me the key if I go with you?”

“Not immediately, no.” He wouldn’t lie or play that particular deception. “However, I’ll consider your request. And perhaps we can come to some arrangement.”

Her expression wavered. He understood the curiosity that relaxed the tense muscles of her face. “How do I know you aren’t just luring me away to thrust a dagger into my back?”

“Because you have to ask for the only thing I want to thrust into you.” Was that the faintest of smiles curving her lips? “Is eating with me such a bad idea?”

Instead of answering, Roseâtre turned away and walked to the back of the stage. His cat went still, watchful. When he would have said something, the cat stilled his tongue. She paused near the curtains that shielded the backstage entrance.

Her shoes.

Anthony blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he held. The cat purred in approval as the Amazon turned and strode over the stage, a general taking to the battlefield. But no general ever looked as sexy as his princess did, the blue shirt riding her curves, long legs shaped to perfection by punishingly high heels, and a saucy hint of a smile on her kissable lips.

She ignored his hand as she walked past but he scented amusement, not irritation, and bounded across the stage to enjoy the view of her firm little ass rolling in invitation as she descended the steps to the theatre floor.

At audience level, she paused, her gaze opaque, unreadable. His cat hesitated, sensing a change in the air but uncertain whether it was the promise of warm rain or the threat of a thunderstorm cresting the horizon.

“Just food, Anthony.” She reminded him when he closed the gap between them.

Curiosity and lust burning in his chest, he prowled after her. Something shifted between them, but neither man nor cat was entirely certain of it.

“As you wish, princess.”

For now.

Chapter Seven

Roseâtre said little as they crossed the parquet of the Arcana Royale's lobby. Overhead, the statue of the Great Sphinx gazed dispassionately at the ebb and flow of normal and paranormal alike. The lobby was a crossroads, populated by arrivals, departures and those unlucky few who had nowhere else to go.

The fashion changed, the hairstyles adjusted and the shoes were always evolving, but the lobby appeared much as it had upon her arrival with Cerveau all those years ago. It was startling to realize she had no idea when she'd arrived. After Pandora, sure, but the exact year seemed to bleed into so many other memories that she couldn't pinpoint it.

Winter. Of that, she was certain. They'd been on a quest, one Cerveau, the librarian, had been determined to complete and for which Roseâtre cheerfully volunteered. Cerveau's hunger for knowledge was a constant source of amusement for Roseâtre. They enjoyed the debate, the hunt and the dig.

Unfortunately, the lust for knowledge led them in the front doors of this very casino, colliding with an obstacle that Roseâtre couldn't simply slay. Beyond the front door lay an entire city, an ever-changing, ever-evolving city where humans thrived on vice. But inside the Royale…life stayed the same. Her heels clicked decisively against the tiles. Behind her, Anthony was a warm shield at her back.

Shield.

It was a strange term to apply to the descendent of a blood-sworn enemy, but it fit. Like the tiger he became, he prowled on silent feet, shadowing her steps. If she stopped too suddenly, she imagined he would brush right up against her back.

Tempting as the thought might be, she forced her legs to keep moving. Cool air brushed her legs and slid under his shirt to tease her overheated skin. The lack of clothing didn't bother her, nor did the wolf whistles and the catcalls. She was used to being noticed and she managed her walk the way she managed her stage performances—as though they were merely battles to be overcome.

At the bank of elevators, she paused. She had no idea what floor Anthony was housed on or if he was even staying within the casino. She suspected he must be, but it didn't matter. Unlike Cerveau and the other dancers, Roseâtre wouldn't turn to dust at sunrise if she were outside. They didn't hold her soul, only her body and her will.

But the consequences would be less than ideal.

A long, golden arm came around her to punch the up button, but instead of retreating, the hand firmed on her hip and drew her against

him. The heat of his skin burned through the cotton of the shirt. The rasp of his jeans brushed against her bottom.

It would be so easy to lean back against him. But the spoils of war went to the victor.

She wasn't ready to surrender yet. The dampness between her thighs decried this pledge, but she ignored it. The doors opened and she tugged free of the contact, but he was right behind her, crowding her into a corner and planting himself between her and the other guests who filtered on.

Roseâtre's eyes skimmed over his bare back, the muscles taut and tense as though prepared for battle. Would he be smooth? Would the skin be hot? Would the muscles ripple as the cat's had?

Would you get your mind out of the gutter?

Folding her arms, Roseâtre tucked her hands under her biceps. She focused her gaze on the pips of the elevator detailing their passage up to the eighth floor, then the ninth, pausing again on the twelfth and thirteenth, but even though many passengers exited, Anthony remained still, watchful.

Awareness flared along the back of her neck. Glancing to the left, she saw a man leaning against the wall, his dark eyes hot and openly staring. He smelled of limes, salt and the barest hint of tequila. Tipping her head to the side, she lifted her eyebrows.

In front of her, Anthony growled, a full-force, rumbling, chest-thumping, growl. She didn't laugh. But she wanted to.

Because Mr. Lime and the Coconut paled and pressed back against the wall of the elevator as though he wanted to fall right through the steel carriage. When the elevator paused on twenty-one, the man bolted, leaving behind a waft of bad cologne to mingle with the tropical scents.

The doors hadn't even closed when Roseâtre started laughing.

Alone finally, Anthony twisted to look at her. His dark scowl was completely undone by the amusement twinkling in his eyes. "Enjoy that, did you?"

"I thought he was going to piss his pants." The mirth bubbling in her chest flexed rusty muscles as she laughed. The sound barked through her, but rose in pitch as his lips twitched.

"He did. A little."

"Poor man." Still, her laughter doubled at Anthony's derisive snort.

She had her amusement firmly in hand, other than the occasional snicker, when they arrived at the fortieth floor and the doors opened. She nearly swallowed her tongue as the call of a bird and the rich, loamy scent of earth swished into the elevator. Anthony stepped into the doorway, bracing his back against the sliding door so it couldn't

close as Roseâtre gaped.

How the hell did they get a jungle into the casino?

She exited slowly, heels sinking into damp soil. The sound of falling water echoed through the underbrush. Overhead, trees seemed to stretch higher than the visible canopy. The air was moist and rain drifted on the wind.

"Wow." She stopped, her gaze skating over the impossible. Despite her initial jungle impression, it was more like a rainforest, with thick-bodied trees, exotic plants, birds flying overhead and in the distance, the echoing rumble of cats yowling a welcome.

"It smells weird because it's magic, but it'll do." Anthony nudged her forward. Roseâtre turned in enough time to see the elevator doors wink closed behind the bark of the largest tree she'd ever seen.

"They did all this with magic?" Apprehension shivered over her skin. The thump of the doors left her alone, in a mystical forest, seemingly so far from the stage of the Midnight Mystery Lounge that she might as well be on the far side of the planet.

"When you're as insanely wealthy as the Royale, I suppose you can create whatever playground you like."

The brush rustled and a familiar white tail flickered into view before vanishing again. The cats were pacing closer to their location.

"And your cats stay here?"

"Yes, they do."

Her stomach clenched. Did tigers climb? Weren't they one of the few species that preferred the ground to the trees? Or was that lions?

A broad forehead pushed aside fat leaves to rub her silver-and-black head against Anthony's leg. He dropped his hand to rub her ears. The female brushed past Anthony to stroke her furry head to Roseâtre's bare thigh.

Her mouth went dry.

"Nalini likes you and she's just saying hello." Despite Anthony's assurances, Roseâtre's palms were damp when she tried to mimic his comforting stroke to the cat's ears. The female seemed to like it though, butting her head back under her hand and demanding more attention.

"She's the cat I've been practicing with all week." They did look all the same, but Roseâtre noticed the numerous differences between Nalini and Anthony's cat. "Are you all weres?"

"No."

Unlike his normal droll response, the answer was short, clipped and warned against further inquiry. He snapped his fingers and Nalini *mrowled* a noise before bounding into the brush. The half-remembered warmth of her fur on Roseâtre's hand the only mark of her presence.

"Let's eat." Anthony strolled toward the trees, following some

path that must be visible only to cat eyes before pausing. “Oh, and lose the shoes so you don’t break that sexy little neck of yours.”

He continued up the path, leaving her to decide whether to follow or not. But she slid out of the shoes. She had no choice in that matter. It was an order.

Damn the key.

The ground was warm and soft under her feet. She padded after him, the tropical setting relaxing the wariness from her spine. The muscles in her legs were sore and tired. The constant rehearsal of a new routine took days for her body to acclimate. The repetitive leg lifts and the need to grip his tiger’s back once she mounted left her thighs quivering.

For more than one reason.

She waved the lusty thought aside. Anthony vanished ahead of her, hidden by the lush curtains of nature. The deeper they plowed, the farther away the casino seemed.

The trees gave way to a grotto housing a large pool of water, agitated by the waterfall spilling into it. Rocks, small and large, sprawled along the shore. Above, next to the falls, Nalini yowled a greeting, and she wasn’t alone. Three more tigers appeared around the pool, rumbling sounds of welcome and looks of curiosity on their faces. This was their land.

Roseâtre was the interloper.

Amidst the tropical paradise, a table-shaped rock sat a few feet from the water, with comfortable chairs surrounding it. Platters of food were set up, each covered by a dull brass lid, rather than silver.

“Oh.” The sound burst out of her and she wanted to slap herself upside the head. No wonder Anthony hated her silver stilettos. “You’re a were.”

He paused, a grin quirking the corner of his generous mouth. “You just figured that out?”

“Yes. I mean, no. The shoes. It’s why you don’t like most of my shoes. They have silver stilettos.”

Patient amusement creased the lines around his eyes. Anthony gestured to the table. “Hungry?”

Despite where his hand pointed and the humor in his eyes, he wasn’t just asking about food. Desire needled through her and Roseâtre sighed.

No more avoiding this elephant in the room.

Or tiger, it would seem.

“What do you want from me?” She stayed at the edge of the clearing, far enough away that even if she wanted to touch him, she’d have to move to do it.

“Is that a trick question?” He fell into one of the chairs, legs

stretching out. His pose was a teasing mockery of indolence.

"You know who I am."

"I do."

"And I know what you are." *Well, I do now and lickable abs or not, you're so far off limits I'm surprised that I haven't been struck by a bolt of lightning.*

"You do." His tone was deceptively mild.

And maddening.

He hitched an elbow on the back of the chair, the motion stretching the sinuous muscle across his golden chest. Her gaze dipped to his navel and back up.

Damn. Why does he have to be sex on a stick?

And when could she beat herself with it?

As if aware of the direction of her thoughts, Anthony just smiled and crooked his finger toward her. "Do you really want to know what I want?"

"Yes."

"I want you to come over here. Sit and eat."

Immediate compulsion rippled through her and she started walking before she could fully process it. She had enough presence of mind to take a different chair, even as she wondered what it would be like to sit on his lap.

The stone was like ice against her super-heated bare ass, but she embraced the cold. It brought clarity. Clarity that punched through the lazy atmosphere of sex and pleasure her cat exuded.

He's not my cat. But she ignored that churlish inner voice.

Anthony frowned, his gaze skating her over from head to toe.

"What?" She demanded when he said nothing. She'd done what he wanted.

He motioned to the first covered platter and Roseâtre opened it, obediently revealing a heavy selection of roast beef, ham, chicken and pork. Her stomach growled vociferously at the first sweet scent of meat.

She was starving. She spared a glance at Anthony, his firm gaze stabbing at her. His fingers tapped lightly against the stone table.

"Feed me." It was a command. *Bastard.*

She plucked a slice of warm roast beef from the platter and knelt into the gap dividing them. It was that or stretch over his lap. Her fingers stroked across his lips, but his gaze never left hers as he opened his mouth, accepting the bite and then sucking deliciously on her finger until he'd suckled the last bit of juice from it.

She waited until he was done before she reached for another bite. He'd told her to feed him and so she would. She had no choice in the matter, but it didn't change how sensuous his lips felt on her skin or

how the slightest tug of his teeth clenched her belly.

It *had* to not matter.

But her traitorous body didn't give a damn what the slave bands told her she had to do. It *wanted* to do these things and clung to the excuse.

He brushed his lips against her knuckles as she waited, poised, an offering of chicken this time on her fingertips for his pleasure. His blue eyes widened in slow shock.

Roseâtre sighed.

He'd figured it out.

"Why did you surrender your free will, princess?"

Chapter Eight

Anthony would be lying if he said he didn't love the image of Roseâtre on her knees, wearing only his blue shirt, coated in his scent and the musk of her own desire. Surprisingly, no matter how tempting a vision she made, face flushed from their exertions on the stage crowned by the swirl of midnight highlighted by that single lock of pure white, he wanted her kneeling because she wanted to be there, because she had no desire to be elsewhere.

Slave bands.

What drove an Amazon to put them on? She had to have volunteered. He had no doubts about that.

"Why?" He repeated the question when she didn't answer him.

Her hazel eyes shuttered, darkening to autumn brown. The muscles in the slender column of her neck convulsed. But it was sadness and regret, not temper that stole across her expression.

"It's not important." Her mouth twisted on the lie. He didn't need his nose to scent it for what it was. Plucking the piece of chicken from her fingers, he popped it into his mouth and chewed. The succulent meat tasted more of cardboard than the Indian spices he'd requested.

He snapped a hand out to catch her arm as she reached for the meat platter. "No."

A quizzical look knitted her dark brows. But she offered no resistance, even if her nipples prodded through the T-shirt, reminding him that she was as attracted to him as he was to her. Anthony ignored the demands of his body, however, the tiger inside him leaned forward with a cautious sniff.

They both wanted the whole story.

"It's very important to me. I can order you to tell me and I suspect those wicked little bands will have your tongue dancing, but I don't want to do that."

"Then we are at an impasse."

The tiger snarled. Anthony agreed and his lips curled back in an unconscious imitation of the sound rumbling in his chest. Roseâtre arched both her eyebrows, haughtiness creeping in to take a defensive stance shielding the vulnerability he'd barely been able to glimpse.

"Eat." Anthony dropped her arm. Frustration was not new to him. Nor was it a sensation he particularly enjoyed. But he wasn't done. She needed to eat. Then they would talk.

Obediently, her hand snaked out to the food and she took meat from the platter. He watched broodingly as the slice disappeared between her lips. Heat flashed in the cool depths of her autumn eyes, but he refused to take back the command.

The key in his pocket burned through the denim, a flaming reminder that he could bend her to his will. But what pleasure was there in conquering that which was already conquered?

"Blades or fists?"

"What?" The question caught her off guard, a single drizzle of roast beef slipping from the corner of her mouth and curving around her chin. His tongue ached to trace the path, but he bit down on it.

Surrender could be forced.

Or it could be won.

"Blades or fists? Is that not how your people take their mates? They choose from the strongest males? The most fit? The most capable of defeating them in battle, in hopes that those strengths will pass on to their daughters?"

The first time his father explained the Amazon mating rituals to him, he'd laughed. His own mother was a powerful tigress, quick and capable in battle, but the idea that a race of women would only couple with the most powerful of men and then expect that man to walk away was ridiculous.

"I could kill you with a blade."

"Blades it is, then."

He bounced to his feet. Roseâtre remained completely still. His chest swelled with pride. Despite the sadness and regret, his princess was strong, confident and didn't shy easily. His tiger purred in agreement. No wonder the great beast had already settled on her. He left her at the table, eating. She wouldn't leave it until he released her from the command.

Anthony may not like slave bands, having seen them used on his own kind, but he understood them. He traveled swiftly, jogging through the mystical rain forest constructed by the in-house mages of the Arcana Royale. He didn't tell her that he'd contracted such an abode, a place he could imagine he was home in and where his tigers could relax in their own habitat.

It was the closest he would come to his home unless he earned the right to challenge his uncle, take back his Pride and lead them. The thought speared through him, the tiger's fierceness quelled by the fierce longing they shared. The path wound to the great bed nestled amongst a cluster of trees and to the bags he'd dropped, half-forgotten upon his arrival.

Flipping the cases open, he pulled out two long, steel blades. Custom built, they were lean steel, forged and reforged in the fires of a volcano. They'd cost him nearly every gold coin he'd managed to smuggle away following his defeat.

They were as light as they were sharp, extending ten inches from the hilts, which were crafted from ancient bones excavated from the

mountains he'd once called home. His gaze skated over the bed with its amber sheets and fixtures. He could imagine carrying her in here, drenched in need, and laying her out to explore every nuance of pleasure they could wring from their bodies.

Balancing a blade in each hand, he grinned. He could imagine it. He could taste it.

And he was going to make it happen.

He raced away from the bed, his blood feverish with the hunt. The tiger roused, pacing inside his skin, as eager as Anthony. He found Roseâtre still kneeling at the table, eating, albeit slower than when he'd abandoned her.

With one smooth motion, he flicked the long blade to hit the dirt next to her, hilt quivering from the force. She paused mid-bite, her gaze slicing upward to clash with his.

"Are you full?" He glanced around the clearing, his gaze sweeping the tigers and they rose from their lazy repose to melt back into the forest. This was his battle, not theirs. He would not have her harm a hair on their bodies, nor would he allow their claws to rend her precious skin.

"Yes. Thank you." She seemed to tack the last two words on as an afterthought.

"You may stop eating then." He issued the command, fully aware it was the last he would give her until he won the right.

Roseâtre inclined her head, a gracious acknowledgement of his release. She unfolded from her kneeling position, rising to her feet with a smooth alacrity that spoke not only to her well-honed body but also to her control. Not once did her gaze return to the quivering blade at her feet.

Anthony felt much like the blade. The risk of a challenge was the awareness that failure could follow. He could lose his own head in their confrontation. He would never take hers.

"You weren't born Roseâtre. What is your name, princess?"

"Ruth." The name echoed against the fall of water spilling down the cliff. The single syllable thumped against his conscience.

"How very Biblical of your mother. I would have thought Helena or Diana." His amusement was reflected in the grin that flirted around her lips.

"A concession to the times. We're not as isolated as we once were."

"No, none of us are." And more was the pity. He understood the queen's actions. It was the custom among the long-lived to take new names to adjust to the modern, whatever that modern might represent. "How old are you?"

"Old enough to have been blooded in battle." Her mouth

tightened because while it was an answer, it wasn't the answer he sought. The bands understood that, the psychic link forged the moment he took possession of the key.

Speaking of the key… He dug his free hand into his pocket and pulled it out. Roseâtre's gaze flicked to the key once and then back to him.

"Princess Ruth, I challenge you to a duel. The prize is your freedom."

Her eyes narrowed, but rather than pleasure, concern filled them. "Choose a different prize."

Startled, he lowered the hand holding up the key. "Why?"

"I don't want my freedom from the bands." He wanted to sneeze at the lie that was not a lie. The tiger twitched, annoyed.

The question hung unspoken on his tongue, but he forced himself to swallow it. The princess was layered in contradictions. He had to unravel, explore, rend her secrets open to the sunlight of understanding. He had to.

"Then the prize will be the truth." The cat agreed with his plan. This prize would be the key to unraveling those layers.

"Why battle for a prize you can simply order?" The haughtiness evaporated from her gaze, leaving only simple curiosity.

"Does it matter?" A breeze stirred the moist air drifting from the pool, carrying a hint of sweet vanilla and muskier orchids. The maids must have brought the tropical flowers into his retreat; orchids didn't bloom in his mountains.

"Yes. You have me at your mercy. You could do whatever you please, yet you offer me a weapon and the opportunity to kill you. I am questioning your wisdom, if not your sanity."

Anthony laughed at the perplexity marring her brow. "I want you to *want* to be at my mercy." Unabashed by the confession, his amusement increased as her mouth open and shut silently, as though she'd been about to share something but then thought better of it.

He rocked back and forth on his heels. The scent of orchids hardly covered the sweet scent of Roseâtre's desire. He'd know it anywhere, having devoured the musk of it on the stage. The tiger purred his agreement. He still carried the scent of her on his fur, a scent neither he nor his cat wanted to wash away.

"Why?"

A fair question. He tossed his blade, catching the hilt easily on the downswing. "If you really want to know, pick up the blade and answer my challenge. The prize of truth remains the same."

Her hand twitched toward the blade. It hadn't been an order, but her expression remained wary. *She's tempted.*

And by the gods, she was tempting.

“The rules?”

He had her.

“No claws or shifting for me. No injuries to vitals for you.”

“First blood?”

He definitely had her.

She crouched, bare legs parting as his shirt rode up. A tease.

A provocation.

A thrill.

“Three stripes. The first one to three stripes wins.” The last thing he wanted to do was mar her creamy skin, but he would be a fool not to give her a fighting chance. A proper battle.

A warrior’s bid.

“No torso.” She rested her hand on the blade hilt. Lust perfumed the air and he drew in a lungful of it.

“Arms and legs only then.”

“Nothing near the groin.” Her gaze roamed over him, sending blood rushing to his cock.

“I’d prefer that, yes.”

“Your fingers can’t wander there on me either.” Was that a smile quirking her lips? Not for the first time he wished scent markers were clearer to discern in members of other species. But either his imagination was going wild or the discussion of battle was turning her on.

“Your ass is fair game.”

A throaty laugh met his counteroffer and she closed her fist around the blade hilt. “That means I can touch yours as well.”

His pulse thudded in his cock.

“Anytime you want, princess.”

He tossed the key onto the stone table. It bounced once. Clinked as it vibrated and finally stilled, pointing away from both of them. The silence echoed against the splash of water and she was a blur, lunging from her crouch, blade slicing through the air to clang against his as he narrowly defended.

Anthony’s tiger roared, the hunt was on and their prey grinned fiercely in response.

Damn, she was magnificent.

Chapter Nine

It was a fool who turned down the opportunity for freedom, but Roseâtre had surrendered hers to honor an oath, and she couldn't in good conscience take the mantle back while Cerveau remained bound to the Royale.

I won't.

Anthony moved gracefully, avoiding her clumsy lunge. "Was really expecting a lot more from you."

He emphasized the insult with a deliberate slap across her bottom. The cotton accepted most of the blow, but one finger collided with her skin, stinging the flesh.

Pivoting, she used a step-ball-change to carry her weight around and slammed the flat of her foot against his ass. He staggered forward, scrambling to keep his balance, and she launched her offensive again.

It was a flurry of slices, blades singing through the air. At first, it seemed as though he wouldn't pay her at least the cursory respect of fighting back, but the bite of steel whistling across her upper arm followed by the wildfire of swift pain put an end to that argument.

"First blood." His grin grew, hard and wide. His eyes flashed, the pupils elongating.

Cat eyes.

"Enjoy it." She dodged another quick cut and scored her blade down the inside of his arm. Blood, thick and red, welled up from the clean slice. She grinned at his hiss.

"Point to you."

They danced around the clearing, narrowly avoiding the stone table and its offering of food. At the water's edge, Roseâtre balanced on the rocks. Years of training flooded through her muscles, rusty from ill use. Dancing required balance, but not the ability to deliver focused blows while avoiding the recoil of such force.

It was the excuse she would use to explain why in avoiding another cut, she ended up windmilling backwards to the water. Anthony caught one flailing arm, balancing her, his expression so intent and focused that she had three seconds of regret before she used his weight against him, flipping him toward the water.

He snagged her shirt and yanked, plunging her into the pool with him. She surfaced to the sting of another cut. A second stripe cut neatly parallel to the first on her biceps.

Wet hair clinging to his face and plastered along one cheek didn't detract from the broad smile on Anthony's face as he surged through the water. Tigers apparently liked to swim. Or maybe it was just him.

Roseâtre struck out for shore when strong hands wrapped around

her thighs and pulled her under. She didn't imagine the scrape of his beard against her ass, the T-shirt floating up to leave her nether regions bare. Nor the yelp as teeth nipped her rear.

Scissoring her legs, she found purchase against that magnificent chest and kicked herself free, surging up and out. She scarcely made it to the rocks when Anthony propelled himself out of the water, landing just a few feet away.

Her rump stung.

"I'd call that three, but I didn't use my blade." Cheeky bastard. "So, sorry."

The damnable thing was, Roseâtre wanted to laugh. The teasing heat of his mouth on the curve of her ass provoked dangerous thoughts. Her gaze skated over his broad, glistening chest. Water droplets skirted his nipples to race down his abs. Despite their exertions, he was barely breathing hard.

She'd compared him to a god when she'd first seen him and looking at him, barefoot, soaking wet with a wild grin on his mouth, she was more convinced than ever.

Surrender could be so easy.

She banished the thought as he pounced, darting right at the last moment and pivoting to kick him. Unfortunately, he learned faster than most of her opponents, catching her ankle and flipping her into a roll midair and catching her left foot to his shoulder for the trouble. He fell on his ass even as she landed on her hands.

They stared at each other, Roseâtre's lips curving upward to match his grin. *Damn, he's fun.*

"Still two to one in my favor." He waggled his eyebrows. "Ready to surrender?"

"Worried you can't take me?"

"Oh, I can take you."

"Then catch me if you can." She threw the verbal gauntlet even as she launched herself, but instead of attacking him, she raced up the path through his forest. For a brief few seconds, as her feet struck the hard dirt surface and she twisted through the trees and crashed through the foliage, she marveled at her own insanity. Anthony was a cat.

She was running.

Of course, he would chase her.

Her cheeks ached from grinning. But that was what she wanted him to do. She wanted him to catch her, to prove that he could take her in battle.

Then in lust.

Her heart thundered a powerful back beat to her headlong run. She couldn't hear his approach over the wild beat of her pulse. She

burst through the trees to see a great bed cradled by a smaller, squat tree pushing up from the forest floor. Thick branches curled over the head and the base, creating a four-poster sensation that was both natural and erotic.

A whishing of sound was all the warning she received before Anthony's hard male body collided with hers, tumbling them both onto the bed. He caught his weight on his arms, the wild heat of him blanketing her back. His arms closed around her front, seizing the wrist that held her blade, turning it so even as she impacted the bed, her cheek flush with the silken sheets, her blade-wielding hand was pointed away, doing no damage to either of them.

The soft brush of his breath against the back of her neck teased her. The T-shirt rode up, leaving her bottom exposed to the roughness of denim, but instead of chafing, he settled his hips firmly against her, removing any and all doubt of his arousal straining the front of his jeans.

Anthony's lips caressed up the column of her throat, blowing lightly until the hair parted to reveal her ear. His teeth closed gently around her earlobe, a nip of admonishment.

"You shouldn't have run." His voice was gloriously dark and edged with hungry passion. His hand tightened around her wrist, the pressure demanding she release the blade, and when her fingers went numb she surrendered it. A thump sounded on the far side as it fell from her nerveless fingers.

Excitement trilled through her insides. His heat burned through the shirt as if it weren't there. She could feel the movement of his muscles as his chest expanded and relaxed with every breath. He nuzzled her ear, gentle nips sprinkled with sharper tugs.

Who knew an ear could be an erogenous zone?

His tongue traced each curve, stroking gentle laps that sent tingles zinging down her spine. She arched upward against the caress, an invitation that her tiger-man seemed to understand, his weight settling with force, legs bracketing hers, his arousal snug against her ass.

"Surrender?"

"We're still two stripes to one." Where the sass came from she didn't know and she didn't care. She enjoyed the growl that vibrated through him, damn near purring into her ear.

"Look again." His voice was low and husky, allowing her just enough freedom to turn her head. A third stripe paralleled the first two. Three cuts.

"You won." Wonder and delight cascaded through her. It was such a ridiculous thing to be happy about, but he'd done it and not just because she'd wanted him to. She'd certainly been giving as good

as she got.

But he won.

To the victor the spoils. She clenched her thighs in anticipation. The length of his cock was hard where it pressed against her. All he needed to do was release the denim and he could be inside her. She nearly groaned at the thought. It'd been a long time since a man had been fast or furious enough to even take up the challenge, much less best her.

"Stop." His hands released her wrists, gliding up her arms as he arched up. His hips pressed hers into the bed and she curved her back, lifting her bottom in invitation. But the damn cat ignored it, cupping his hands under her and massaging her breasts. "To the victor the spoils." He echoed her earlier thought. "And as much as I'd like to strip you bare and take you right now, that was not what we were competing for."

Seriously?

Desire thudded with every pulse between her legs and when he pinched her nipples through the shirt, rolling them between his thumbs and forefingers, she wanted to weep. She bumped her bottom against his groin, grinding ever so slowly.

"Bad girl." He bit down on her ear, the tug on her nipples both enticing and rebuking. "Behave and maybe I'll help you out with your little problem."

My little problem? She was going to kill him.

His right hand abandoned her breast, stroking his way down the shirt to dip between her thighs.

"You do want help with this?" His fingers teased through the curls shielding the entrance of her sex. Warm wetness flooded between her thighs, it took all her control not to whimper as his thumb slid past the wet lips to tease her clit. And by the gods, what teasing. He wouldn't quite touch it, circling it gently, just allowing her to feel the slightest pressure.

"What…" Was her voice really that husky? "…do you want?"

"Truth, remember?" His tongue glided down the curve of her ear before grazing his teeth over the soft spot just behind it. Her pulse roared. She tried to spread her legs, to invite his hand deeper, but he locked his legs on hers, rocking his thumb in a teasing cadence.

"Why the slave bands? Why did you surrender?" The questions beckoned her as his fingers continued their slow torment. His left hand stroked away from her breast to brace against the bed. His heat abandoned her as he pushed himself upward. She undulated, writhing, straining to reach his thumb, but he always whisked it away, not giving her the satisfaction her body hungered for.

"You're killing me." She gritted through her teeth. There was no

loss of pride in admitting her desire. He'd won that right. He'd taken her in fair battle, proving his worth for breeding. She had every right to take him as a lover.

She couldn't wait to run her hands over every muscle, taste the quivers of his passion and explore the deliciously concave formation of his abs. All he had to do was roll over, or better, just slide his fingers to the right. Maybe then, she could think clearly.

"Not yet, princess. I'll happily fulfill every fantasy, drive into you until the only thought in your head is *more*." His words stoked the heat in her belly hotter. "I'll run my tongue around your nipples, nibble your breasts and then gorge myself on the scent of you." His thumb grazed the side of her clit and her body exploded.

He petted her through the orgasm, peppering kisses along the dampness of her neck, hand cupping her sex as he teased her higher and faster. She came apart for him, unabashed in her release. Her fingers dug into the sheets, holding on as the world spiraled away. The scent of him was everywhere. She was drowning in the rich blanket of cedar, rosewood and oak. Rain threatened in the distance, but it couldn't quench the heat billowing through her.

She wanted him inside her. She wanted to feel the first stab of his cock as it slid home, driving deep into her womb. Amazons only engaged in sex to bear children. That was the rule. Blasphemy aside, she didn't want to conceive.

Because she wanted the excuse to do it again.

And again.

When the last tremor rocked through her, she became aware of the soft purring against her back and ear. *Gods, he even purrs sexily*.

"Better?" he asked, finally slowing his fingers to allow her an odd rest amidst the drenching pleasure soaking every muscle.

"Hell yes, it's better. But I want more." The words squeezed past the lump in her throat. Her eyes stung with wetness, and she closed them lest he see the unexpected tears flooding them. The hell she was going to cry or to beg, no matter how much she wanted him.

"Was that so very hard to admit?" His hands seemed to be everywhere, stroking her thighs, ass, back and then up under the shirt until a warm, callused palm cupped her bare breasts. Her body softened under the attention. He rolled onto his side, spooning her, exploring.

"You have to ask?" It was a stupid question and they both knew it. She wasn't going to pretend he didn't understand Amazonian customs.

"Actually," he murmured, massaging her breasts in lazy circles, "yes. I've never met an Amazon who would acquiesce to slave bands. They are anathema to you, aren't they?"

Roseâtre shrugged, enjoying the sensation of his callused fingers, curious about letting her hands wander, but he was still playing the dominant, lying behind her, controlling the direction she faced, what she could reach. So she settled for just rubbing her bottom against the stiff front of his jeans.

"To an Amazon, our sisters are everything. To a princess, the tribe is all. There is nothing I wouldn't sacrifice for them." She hadn't expected the honest confession, but it was easier to dislodge that great boulder from her chest than she'd imagined.

"So it's for the other Amazon that you sacrificed your freedom?" He peeled back the T-shirt, baring her shoulder for his bite and she closed her eyes. It was a terribly possessive maneuver, a display of dominance, control and ownership.

Where else would he like to leave his mark?

"Do we have to talk about this now?" It was a distraction, he'd wrung enough from her that she couldn't be humiliated by his need to delve into what remained of her pride, but at the same time, she was far more interested in exploring him.

"We have all day, Ruth."

Day.

She scissored upward, startling him into releasing her.

"What time is it?"

"Nearly dawn, why?"

"Oh hell."

It was more than nearly dawn. She felt the first shiver of the sun's ascent in the languor of her muscles. The cold followed it, swift and pervasive, punching through the lazy heat of desire, drowning the pleasure-warmed muscles.

"I'm sorry," she managed to say, sitting up with one leg hanging off the bed, she twisted to face him. Her position allowed her to see the alarm that stole across his features as the grayness swamped her and winked Anthony out of existence.

And then she knew nothing.

Chapter Ten

Anthony's nostrils flared. Where once tangy citrus, dates and the musk of feminine desire had caressed his nose, only a whiff of porcelain remained. Roseâtre sat frozen, his blue shirt bunched around her waist, one long leg stretched out on the bed, the other hanging loose.

She didn't breathe.

She didn't blink.

She didn't *live*.

Coiled rage vibrated through his cat, claws raking the inside of his skin. The beast demanded that he fix it, that he return Roseâtre. Anthony couldn't agree more. With tender fingers he touched the three slices he'd cut horizontally across her biceps. They were red, discolored and angry against the pale, doll-like porcelain state of her skin.

The surface of her flesh was ice to the touch. Too smooth. Too lifeless.

"Come to life again," he ordered, gruff emotion clogging his voice. The gold wristbands and collar glowed, warming imperceptibly, but she didn't move.

Lunging off the bed, he was careful not to disturb her. What would happen if she fell? Would she, like ancient statues in half-forgotten temples, simply crumble? Would she shatter? His mind whirled with violent possibilities. He found the house phone tucked away in the base of another tree.

Damn clever magicians masking common items in the rainforest suite. He dialed the Midnight Mystery Lounge, gaze pinned on the slender column of Roseâtre's neck. She faced away from him.

Could she hear him?

"I haven't gone anywhere. I'm just calling downstairs to…" He broke off when the jangling ring interrupted and was answered immediately.

"She's fine, Mr. diNapoli. She will resume her human form at sundown." The simple statement sent a fresh wave of rage roaring through his blood. Heidi might have impressed him with her no-nonsense attitude and brusque manner, but how could anyone be so cavalier?

"What the hell is wrong with her? What did you people do?"

"It's not important. What's important is that she will be herself once more when the sun sets."

It was a measure of control that kept him from cracking the phone in half. "I have a right to a straight answer."

“Actually, Mr. diNapoli, you have the right to demand those answers from Roseâtre, not from me. If you can’t handle it, I’ll send Stan up to collect her so she can awaken in her own suite.”

“No.” He didn’t have to think it over. He’d eviscerate any man that tried to walk in and take her away.

“Fine. Then I suggest you get some rest. We have approximately eleven and a half hours till sunset. Considering you’ve rehearsed six of seven days this week, I’ll give you and Roseâtre the night off. I’ll expect you both, promptly, tomorrow evening.”

And then she hung up.

Anthony stared at the phone, his fist clenching until it broke into three pieces.

She posed the night off like it was a gift. Then reminded him he still had a job to do.

Bitch.

“Your boss is a piece of work,” he told Roseâtre’s still form, circling the bed to gaze at her glassy eyes. A mournful keening swelled in his throat. The cat didn’t understand.

Hell, Anthony didn’t either. He considered the key, but she’d been adamant about leaving the collar and bands in place. He couldn’t seem to sit still.

Anthony paced from one side of the small clearing to the other. A questioning yowl came from the direction of the path, but Anthony waved Nalini and the other females off. His distress was calling to them. But he didn’t know how they’d react to Roseâtre’s porcelain prison.

He couldn’t afford to find out the hard way.

Did he use the key or not?

Would that free her?

What would he do if it didn’t?

What would she do if she discovered his choice?

The thoughts collided, tumbling over and over. He’d won their sparring match. By the laws of her people and his, she belonged to him. The cat growled in fierce agreement.

“Fine. I’ll leave them where they are, but when you wake we’re removing them. Together. I don’t know what oath holds you to those bands and I don’t care.” That was a lie. Of course, he cared.

He scowled, raking his fingers through his hair.

“Fine, I *care*, but only because it matters to you. But you’re going to let me help you.” He stabbed two fingers in her direction, the command vibrating through him. She might be silent, still, locked in the prison of magic so deep and ancient he had no explanation for it, but he understood the slave bands.

That command would linger.

By the gods she would hate him.

But she'd have to be alive to do so, and he would gladly suffer her fury to see the light come back into her eyes, the fierce pleasure of her grin and the wild energy of her being pulsing around him.

The day was endless, interminable. He paced. He swam. He ate what was left of their dinner. The food tasted of ashes and the scents of the forest were too false. His mind could latch on to nothing save the doll awaiting the sunset.

The grass around his bed was flattened, dented with the imprint of his bare feet. He'd stripped out of his jeans to swim and left them in a pile next to the pool.

Shifting, the cat stretched and resumed the man's circuit, tail twitching. He paused at her bare leg, brushing it gently for fear of harming her. He even whuffled his breath down to her bare, still toes and swiped them with his tongue.

To his disappointment, she didn't flinch.

The cat finally tired of pacing and waiting. He ignored the phone when it rang, settling down to sit and watch, tail thrashing back and forth.

Sundown approached.

His fur tingled. Nose quivering, he opened his mouth to taste the air. A shiver of feeling scraped an icy-hot path across his teeth and tongue like spearmint. Unexpected, but not unpleasant.

Motion trembled the hand on the bed. His gaze fastened on to the long, slender fingers as they flushed pink and clenched the sheets. The color spread rapidly over her, the porcelain flaking away in sparks of magic.

The cat became a man, fur melting away until it was his curled fists resting on the bed. Roseâtre's eyes blinked once, then twice, as her chest lifted, filling the air with the sweet, swift sound of her breathing.

"Hello."

He swallowed the tremulous word off her lips, kissing her with a fierce intensity. Her lips parted under his, welcoming the invasion of his tongue as he swiped it against her teeth, dueled with her tongue and drank deep of the flavor that was Roseâtre.

All of his good intentions slipped away as he ripped the shirt apart, not willing to leave her lips to pull it over her head. She seemed to be a more than active participant. He groaned as her hands stroked over his shoulders, nails grazing his biceps and then across his chest. Sliding his arms under hers, he lifted her until she could wrap her legs around his waist. He broke from the kiss long enough to meet her pleasure-drenched gaze.

"Tell me." The words were gruff, hoarse with need. He fought the

urge of his body to buck.

"Take me," Roseâtre whispered, sliding her hand between them. His cock jerked as she closed her hot palm around it and then she was urging him to her and he was enveloped in slick, hot folds.

It would be fierce. His body demanded speed and he didn't want to wait to mark her. She braced her feet flat on the bed behind his kneeling legs, pelvis dipping to meet his thrusts. He glided his hands up her back, testing the heat of her skin.

He plunged his fingers into her hair as his body drove into hers. She tilted her head, back curving. Small sounds rocked from her throat as he surged up, pushing deeper. The inner muscles of her sex clung to him, squeezing him until he could barely see.

The musk of her permeated the air, driving away the magical stink of her imprisonment. Her body goaded his, riding him with abandon. Her head tilted back, her mouth open to the faux sky above and her breasts brushed his beard.

His balls tightened unbearably, the pressure building to a fever pitch. His mouth opened, capturing a puckered nipple and suckling it until he felt her convulse. And still he drove into her, torturing the nipple until it was full, plump and pointed.

Her nails ripped into his shoulders, scoring deep and his release burst free. His heart slammed into his chest as he continued thrusting, the need to fill her primal. He surged upward, still buried, and slammed her back against the bed, his mouth going to the swell of her breast.

"Anthony…" Her voice shook. But the beast in him wouldn't be dissuaded, pushed away or rejected.

Not now.

Not after mourning her loss throughout the day.

She writhed beneath him, his cock swelling full once more, even as he rode the cusp of his orgasm. His body wanted his mate. Wanted her marked. Wanted his scent all over her. No one would mistake her for anything else.

He pinned her hands to the bed, driving deeper with long, even strokes. His tongue swirled over the curve of her breast, her body strained against his, hips rising to meet him and he accepted the surrender for what it was.

With the cat's roars echoing in his mind, Roseâtre's orgasmic shouts of pleasure humming in his ears and the scent of their bodies coming together filling his nose, Anthony bit down.

Marking her.

Mine.

Chapter Eleven

Roseâtre sprawled under the great weight of the man buried deep inside her. His mouth nuzzled the bruise on her breast, his tongue tracing the pattern left by his teeth. Her muscles were soft and loose. She didn't think it possible to want him again, but his quiescent cock was already stirring to life, tormenting the swollen walls of her sex.

She clenched as his beard rasped against her too sensitive nipples. He bit her again, gentler, but no less possessive. He suckled hard, pulling pleasure from the turgid tip until she arched her body upward, begging for more.

She slid her fingers into his hair, holding him fast. The pleasure was becoming pain, insistent and demanding. Deep in her mind, the warrior within her shouted at her to resist, but he chose that exact moment to thrust and the world came apart again.

It was mindless, this need to possess and be possessed.

He carried her boneless form to the pool and plunged them both into the icy water. She clung to him as he bathed them both, obeying when he urged her to the shore.

"Hold the rocks," his command compelled her, but she was already reaching out to grasp them. He refused to let her explore, to touch him as his hands stroked the fever in her body. He held her hips as his cock drove into her, every stroke wringing more pleasure from her and his second mark took the back of her neck.

This wasn't the man. This was the tiger.

And she came apart for him.

Anthony stretched alongside her, one hand resting possessively on her hip. He admired the mark on her breast and the faint shadow of the one he left on the back of her neck. *Mine.* Fierceness swept through him—fierceness and a sense of belonging he hadn't experienced in too long.

"What are you thinking about?" The soft question surprised him. He thought her asleep.

"You." It was like coming up for fresh air. "I was drowning before I met you."

She rolled onto her back and looked up at him. A quizzical little frown wrinkled her brows. "You're a cat…you have your Pride. How could you be drowning?"

He waited for the shame to crawl through him. "My Pride is here…all around us. All I have left."

"But they aren't weres…" Curling an arm behind her head, she

studied him.

"No, they aren't." A hint of regret coated the back of his throat, but the shame didn't assault him. "I asked you for a truth, now I'll give you one, if you wish."

"That's a loaded offer." She trailed her fingers across his stomach. He allowed the caress, the cat settling. The stomach was a vulnerable area, too vulnerable to allow casual contact with an outsider.

But for his mate? For his mate, he would bare his throat. She should know his shame.

"It's merely a truth. Are you really not curious?" He rolled onto his side and braced his head on his hand. He enjoyed watching her. So many thoughts collided behind the murky forest of her eyes. He wanted to delve into their secrets until he knew her as well as himself.

"Curiosity is for cats." She protested too swiftly.

"Very well." He settled down, burying his face into her hair. Inhaling her scent, he sighed. The silence stretched between them. She fidgeted, but he feigned relaxation.

"Really?" she asked in a burst of sound.

"Hmm?" He traced a circle around one reddened, swollen nipple. It was fat and full from his attention.

"You're not going to tell me now?"

Smiling against her neck, he gave a little shrug. "You weren't curious."

She growled and he found himself on his back with her straddling his hips. "I didn't say I wasn't curious. I said curiosity is for cats. You're a cat."

"So you do want me to tell you?" Amusement filled him. Frustration flickered in her eyes and she bared her teeth. The gods were kind to provide him with such a powerful mate.

She pinched him. "Yes."

Running his hands up and down her thighs, he laughed. "Say please."

Her eyes widened, irritation flashing across her expression. Her mouth opened, but instead of the rebuke he could see boiling through her, she merely said, "Please." And scowled.

"Sorry, princess," he soothed, rising up to cradle her against him. "I couldn't resist." Tweaking his mate was only fun when she enjoyed it too.

Her stiff shoulders relaxed. "I do want to know, Anthony. If you'll tell me. Why aren't you in a Pride with other weres?"

"My father led our Pride for many seasons, he was a fine warrior, and a cunning leader. He died when I was sixteen…a car accident of all things." Anthony shook his head. His father met so many challenges during his reign, invaders, wars and a world speeding

headlong into a technological age. He adapted and thrived. “He was decapitated.” An injury no tiger could recover from.

“I’m sorry.” She wrapped her arms around him, offering comfort. Cats thrived on touch and Anthony was no different. He pulled her closer, sealing her body to his. The contact kept him grounded.

“It was a difficult time, made more so by my belief that as my father’s eldest son, I should be Alpha.” An assumption many in the Pride shared. Many, but by no means all. “My mother didn’t want me to make the claim, she asked me to let it go. To let others…to let the older males sort it out. True leadership can be found anywhere, and I was still untested and unblooded in battle.”

Her lips pressed against his shoulder, the lightest of kisses. It eased the sting he knew to be coming. The telling of it once eluded him, but his soul quieted, ready to unbind the wound in his soul.

“I didn’t listen. I wanted to be my father’s heir, I wanted to be as admired and as fierce as he. I wanted to know that when I walked in the room, all eyes would turn toward me and that they’d listen when I spoke.” Arrogance and pride were his chosen poisons. “I threw my name into the ring. Only a handful sought the mantle of leadership. But no sooner did I announce my claim than my uncle announced his.”

His father’s brother never indicated any interest until that moment. Old resentments surfaced and Anthony ran his hands up and down her back, in part to remind himself where he was and in part to soothe.

“What happened?” It didn’t matter that the answer was obvious, she gave him the grace of explaining it.

“Many of the contenders withdrew when my uncle announced. He was—is still—well respected within the Pride. He is not an evil man, just…an ambitious one. Only one contender did not withdraw.”

Her quiet sigh was nearly his undoing.

“I thought I would lose face and he was my uncle, not the rightful heir. I was younger, stronger, faster. He was past fifty, I had to have the advantage.”

His Amazon leaned back until their gazes met. “Youth and skill?”

“Unfortunately, neither proved as much of an advantage as I would have liked. My uncle ordered me to stand down, I refused. He ordered me a second time…and I attacked him. My pride cost me my Pride.” His jaw flexed, she eased his loneliness, but the echo of it remained.

“But losing…losing would have just meant he led, not you.” She understood Pride politics.

Pleased, he kissed her gently. “Yes. But I wouldn’t bow to him. I refused to acquiesce the fight. He could have killed me, but out of love

for my mother I think, he settled for banishing me."

"But you were young." She scowled. "Too young to just be thrown out."

He expected disgust or at the very least disappointment. "I was old enough to challenge him and old enough to believe it was my right to lead. I think…I think they all hoped I would come crawling back. But if I wasn't strong enough to take my proper place, I refused to beg for it. So I was alone in the world…and it isn't a friendly place. I found Nalini in a zoo in Bucharest. I stole her…and I wanted to return her to the mountains, but she wouldn't leave me. One by one, I found the others…"

"And you started your own traveling circus." Rose shook her head.

"We're hardly a circus." He nipped her lower lip. "They are my Pride now. I couldn't win the one I was born to, so I built my own. So now, you know my shame."

Leaning back, she studied him. "Will you go back and challenge him now?"

Another uncomfortable truth, but she deserved to know. "When I realized you were an Amazon, I thought I might. Delivering you to the Pride would be quite a demonstration of strength and it could give me the leverage I need to prove my leadership in battle again."

"And now?"

"I don't know. I don't know that I care enough about leadership to tempt that fight especially when I care more about you…and I'll kill anyone who tries to take you from me." Saying it made it real. He didn't want to disappoint, but it was his truth.

She laughed and hit him in the shoulder. "Leadership isn't about winning, silly cat. It's about doing what's best for your Pride or in my case, my Tribe. You couldn't follow your uncle, so you didn't stay. I get that."

Flipping her over, he leaned down and nuzzled her throat. The slave collar tasted metallic against her skin. He found freedom in baring his soul. He needed to find her freedom next. "I have my cats… and now I have you."

"Oh?" The arch challenge in her voice sent his blood racing. "Do you really have me?"

"I'm about to."

She lost count of their couplings. He took her on her knees, on her back, astride him and in his lap. Everywhere his fingers touched, pulses of pleasure flashed through her.

When he moved down her body, his mouth poised at her thighs, she closed her eyes and surrendered. His third mark seared her inner

thigh and she shouted his name, coming even as his breath whispered over her clit.

Finally, they were twined together in the soft grass, a breeze cooling their flesh. Her hand stroked lazily across his chest, exploring the ridges of muscle.

The faux sun had traveled through the artificial sky. Around them, the forest rustled. She lifted her gaze at the first flash of white and stared as the tigers drifted out of the mist curling across the forest floor. One by one, they gathered into the clearing, stretching out to greet Anthony and Roseâtre by turns, until they were sprawled all around them.

It should have unnerved her, this display of power, of unity, of Pride, but she reached out her fingers to caress Nalini's sweet face. The tiger seemed to almost smile, her raspy tongue swiping across Roseâtre's fingers in warm welcome.

"They know you're mine." Anthony's husky voice rumbled. The tiger reflected in the cool blue of his eyes. Dear gods, she was his. The thought should have been enough to ice the languid heat still surging in her blood, but she was full to the brim with being his.

"You marked me."

"Yes, I did. More than once." A smirk took up residence on his sensuous mouth. Pride at his accomplishment colored his words. He was so damn male.

Her male.

Roseâtre sighed. The soft sound stilled Anthony's features, chilling the ardor of his gaze.

"Are you unhappy with it?" The question was solemn, out of place in their sensuous stupor.

"I should be," she admitted, hating herself for the flash of pain that steeled his features. "An Amazon mating is fleeting, lasting only until we conceive."

"But?" Her cat was wise, she'd discovered, pressing past the surface to probe for deeper answers. Answers she wasn't always willing to share.

"But you marked me."

His brow furrowed and he tucked a hand behind his head, stretching his magnificent chest. Did he have any idea what the motion of his muscles did to her? Her hungry gaze roamed over him. She wanted to thump her breast and scream it from the cliff top. He was hers.

Amazons don't mate for life. Amazons don't submit. Amazons require men for one thing and then they release them. Roseâtre didn't feel much like an Amazon.

"You're crying." He raised his free hand, gliding it over her cheek,

thumb stroking away the moisture she hadn't even realized was there.

"By marking me, you've staked a claim."

"I'm aware, trust me." His bearded cheeks dimpled. Pure masculine satisfaction swelling with each word.

"By allowing you to mark me, I've submitted to that claim."

He went still. Hadn't expected that, had he? She grinned, pleased and rueful at once. It was better that he not become too accustomed to her surrender. It wasn't in her nature to be passive.

"You're mine." Despite the firmness of the statement, a sliver of query hung at the end of the word.

"I wish it was that easy." The words were simpler to express than she might have imagined. Her body and soul committed where her mind feared to tread.

Perhaps the surrender inherent in her words was enough, because Anthony pounced. "It *is* that easy. You're mine. I am not letting you go, and if that means tying you to a bed and torturing you with pleasure until you scream it to the sky, then I'll do it."

Her body heated at the seductive promise. "Will you really?"

"Do you prefer satin or silk?" He purred.

Roseâtre's eyes widened. "For what?"

"To be tied up with. I'll fetch it right now."

She dropped her lips to his chest and lapped her tongue across his nipple. Stiffness rolled through his body, the musk of their shared passion drenching the air. She scraped her teeth over his pectoral, testing the flesh.

"Bite me," his voice was dark, smoky and hot with need.

"I want to," she confessed against his skin. It was easier to admit if she wasn't looking into his sinful blue eyes. "But I am sworn by oath, Anthony."

"Oaths can be broken."

"No." Her heart cracked at the idea. "I'm a princess. My oaths are in my blood. No matter what my body desires. No matter what my soul hungers for. I cannot break with my oath, it would destroy me."

Nothing he said to her seemed to change her mind. He made love to her body, but she held hostage that last piece of her soul. He wanted to celebrate their mating, but no matter how strong the bond between them grew, she held herself aloof when they were among the other dancers. When Heidi summoned her away from rehearsal, he crouched on the stage and stared down at the key in his palm. The bite of bronze stung at his nostrils and he flicked his gaze up to stare at the second Amazon in the theatre's lineup.

"She won't choose you." Anthony couldn't hold back the snarl. He didn't understand Cerveau's name. It was French for Brain. Who

named a child brain?

"She already has." Challenging an Amazon's possession was not the smartest decision he'd ever made, but he wouldn't retreat from the challenge in her cool blue eyes. Unlike Roseâtre's passionate hazel, with their promise of the dark forest and deep pleasure, Cerveau's were like chips of ice, unrelenting and unmoved.

"No. She has given you her body." The ice in her regard slithered over his skin. "Admittedly, I see the appeal. But she will not choose you, no matter how many times you mark her."

The tiger in him stretched, claws dragging against the inside of his skin. He didn't bother to disguise the cat staring out from behind his eyes. "You can't force her to stay where she doesn't want to be."

"And you can't force her to go where she doesn't want to go." The blonde's mouth tightened into a parody of a smile. But despite the tough expression, fear lingered in her scent, coating the back of his throat. She didn't want to be left behind.

He sympathized, but he wouldn't be intimidated. Rising, he tipped his head to the side and lifted his brows. "I would never force her to be something she isn't, nor would I demand she serve a master to save me."

The black scowl creasing Cerveau's forehead promised swift retribution. "I asked her for nothing."

"No. But *you* are the reason she's here." He knew it as surely as he knew his mate by her scent, her walk and her touch. Her loyalty to this one Amazon kept her trapped in slave bands, prisoner to the Arcana Royale—a royal hostage. His heart swelled with admiration and respect for Roseâtre's giving heart. But his soul thrashed at the idea of her submission.

It was not just the Amazon princess the Overseers held now, but his mind. Neither he nor his cat would settle for this slavery.

Not for her.

The key on his chest burned against his skin. She'd refused every attempt to remove the bands. And she also refused the gift of potential freedom when he tried to give it to her.

"I did not ask her to do this for me." Cerveau recoiled, her mouth open as though she intended further speech when Roseâtre appeared. Her hazel eyes snapped at him, hot and furious.

He held up a hand, palm forward, but her temper washed through him like a hot summer breeze. "Cerveau, we're supposed to be practicing."

Anthony considered placating her or at least making peace, but the blonde Amazon surprised him, she twisted to face the princess. "Did you stay here because of me?"

"Cerveau…"

“Rose. Answer me.” The little mouse with the ice-cold eyes had spine and while he couldn’t see her expression, no one could mistake the edge of steel in her voice.

“I stayed because of me. Don’t listen to the cat. He’s mad because I won’t choose him.” The words lashed at him, scoring deep. “We need to practice—”

“You *did* stay because of me. Dammit, Rose, I’m not a child.” Cerveau waved off Roseâtre’s hand and stalked away, her posture stiff. But it was her scent that pulled Anthony—terror mingled in sadness.

“How dare you?” Roseâtre growled at him and pivoted to stalk after her friend. The man in him recognized that he should let her go, he’d pushed her temper, but he caught her arm and tugged her back against him. Her rigid posture refused to yield even when he nuzzled the back of her neck.

“I dare because you’re my mate, Roseâtre.” He kept his tone simple. “Mates don’t hold back. Your battles…”

“…are not yours. Dammit, Anthony.” She turned in his arms and slid her own around him, squeezing him. The hostile Amazon in her sharpened, but failed to dilute the woman. “You have to leave this alone.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because if you continue to challenge it…” Her mouth compressed and she sucked in a noisy breath and released it in near silence. “Because you could get hurt. They could come after you and use it as leverage.”

“So now, you protect your shield-sister and you protect me.” The cat in him arched his back, proud that his mate wanted him safe, but they would not let her take the hits for them.

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“No. I treasure it.” He stroked his finger down her cheek to her throat and then traced the hidden collar. Whatever magic kept it fastened into place also disguised it. “But I can’t allow you to do that.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman?” The bite in her words barely brushed him and he chuckled, kissing her angry mouth until her lips softened and a sigh escaped.

“No,” he whispered. “Because you’re mine and I protect what’s mine.”

It took great force of effort to let her go, but he did. If she would not tell him the truth—then perhaps her stage manager would.

“You have to make him stop.” Roseâtre planted her palms against Heidi’s desk. Minion bounced from chair to chair until she landed on Roseâtre’s shoulder and wrapped her arms around her neck. The little imp was equal parts annoying and sweet.

“You need a hug,” Minion announced confidently and snuggled closer. She lifted a hand to stroke the little one’s hair, but didn’t take her gaze away from the stage manager writing in the giant monster of a book covering most of her desk space.

“What Mr. diNapoli chooses to do is not up to me, Roseâtre.”

“Of course it is. You manage everything.”

Heidi glanced up from the book and a fraction of a smile eased her expression. Setting the pen aside, she leaned back in the chair and interlaced her fingers over her belly. “What do you want me to do?”

“Get the key back, for one, and convince him that he doesn’t have to free me.” The words left her in a rush, but she managed to clamp down on the request to protect him. Heidi’s impassive expression revealed nothing of her thoughts.

“He has the key because you couldn’t get along with him safely. That was your decision, not mine.” Heidi studied her. “As for whether or not he will *free* you, that’s his decision—to a point.”

She wanted to bang her fists against the desk, but she curled them into fists, nails biting into her palms. Temper never persuaded Heidi. “If he frees me, you lose two lead dancers in as many months.”

“True and I have an entire chorus line to choose from. Sit down, Roseâtre.” Heidi waved to the chair opposite her and picked up her pen. “You need to think this all the way through.”

To her amazement, Heidi went back to writing in her book. Still holding the snuggling Minion, she obeyed the stage manager and sat. “Think what through?”

“All of it. You’re reacting—a bad habit of yours I must admit. I would think you learned that lesson when you joined the show, but apparently not.” Heidi’s pen scratched along the paper.

“I’m not reacting. I’m trying to protect—” She broke off on that sentence. Anthony said she was trying to protect him as she did her shield-sister. She wasn’t allowing him a choice in the matter.

Nor had she really allowed Cerveau.

But an oath is an oath. I made my choice when I made that oath…

“And now she thinks.” Heidi didn’t look up. She simply turned the page, dipped her pen in the inkwell and returned to her notes.

Minion patted her hair. “You don’t have to think. It’s a lot more trouble than it’s worth.” The little one giggled and bounced off her shoulder to land on the desk—perching carefully lest she disturb the page Heidi worked on. She picked up a puzzle box and began to work the shifting pattern on the top.

“Why is Anthony here?”

“Because I needed an act to help bring more customers inside. We’ve had too sharp a decline since Pandora left.”

“I get that.” Roseâtre tread carefully. “But why Anthony? Why a

weretiger when you know my Tribe and his Pride have been mortal enemies for centuries?"

"Have they now? How very Bronze Age of them." Heidi sighed and set aside her pen again. Roseâtre refused to take the bait of the deflection and stared at the stage manager. "Let me ask you a question. Why are you here?"

"You know why."

"No, here in my office. Why are you here?"

"Because Anthony won't let it go." At Heidi's arched eyebrow, she fumbled and clamped her mouth shut. Why was she asking for Heidi's help? Just the thought of Anthony made her pulse race. She loved his scent. Adored how he wrapped his arms around her and insisted that she stay in his suite even when the sun claimed her soul.

The pain and torture in his eyes that turned to light when she awoke each of the past four evenings welcomed her, embraced her—seduced her. Working together the last three nights, even as grueling as rehearsal became, were some of the best in recent memory.

In my whole life. To be honest. She didn't shy away from the truth or the pain. *I've never felt like this and I don't want to lose it—or him. So why am I asking Heidi to stop him?*

Her heart squeezed in her chest.

"Do you still wish me to intervene?" Heidi and Minion both stared at her, twin expressions of patience and amusement on their faces.

"No." Roseâtre shook her head slowly and then more firmly. "No, thank you."

"Excellent. You have rehearsal and I have work."

Dismissed, Roseâtre stood and gave Minion another pat before walking out of the stage manager's office and into Anthony leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest. His body said relaxed, but the sharp, assessing look in his eyes told her he heard everything.

"I'm sorry." She thought it would be hard, but the words came out easily.

He tilted his head, brows lifted in mild question.

"I need more time." It was an evasion, but it smacked of the truth. She wanted Anthony to stop asking her because she wanted to say yes.

But how did she reconcile the desire to be with him and break her oath with the need and in all honesty, the desire, to honor her oath?

"Okay." He cupped the back of her neck and drew her to him for a kiss as soft as a spring rain, the touch of his lips searing her to her soul. "Cats are very patient."

She chuckled. "Since when?"

"Since you need me to be."

Damn. Her heart trembled, another brick shattering from the wall

between who she wanted and who she was supposed to be.

"Cat." Cerveau stared down at him. He'd shifted to get ready for their dress rehearsal, but the Amazon waited just off the stage in the wings where they would be hidden in the shadows.

He studied her face as she knelt down and brought herself level with him. It was a risky position for a warrior to adopt—particularly when he could take her throat out or rake her from breast to belly in one strike. He canted his head, nose twitching. Hints of a familiar scent clung to her—no—came from her. The touch of exotic spice accented the bite of bronze.

Even her eyes were different—warm like the Mediterranean—melting the ice he'd seen there before.

"Don't let her stay here because of me." Of all he expected her to say, that was not it. "I don't understand it most of the time," she continued, darting a look around to make sure they were still alone. He flicked his ears. No one was close enough to hear her hushed whispers. "But I know she stays because of me. If you can persuade her to go—do it. Don't let her say no."

He would love to deny her a choice in the matter. She wore slave bands. He could strip them off tonight when they were done and free her. But that would only infuriate her and if she went into them once, what would it do to him to have his mate submit to it again?

He sneezed and shook his head. He couldn't force this decision. No matter how much he wished otherwise. He'd tried to corner the stage manager, but she ignored him. Roseâtre asked him for time.

He would give it.

"Please just—" If he hadn't been watching her, he might never have seen it but the deep blue of her eyes retreated behind walls of frost. The guard returned to her expression and the soft pleading in her mouth firmed to a hard line. "Do as you will, cat, but she made her choice and you won't change her mind."

She rose in one fluid motion, pivoted and marched back out on the stage. Anthony sat back on his haunches.

Another clue.

The woman who encouraged him to get Roseâtre out of here was trapped behind another far colder and indifferent one. The flattened scent she left in her wake confirmed his suspicion.

Roseâtre strolled toward him, her hips swaying, and he tipped his head back to catch the flavor of her against his tongue. She brushed a hand across his head and stroked his ear. "Ready to go to work?"

He rubbed his cheek to her leg, marking her with his scent and purred. Yes, he was definitely ready to work for his answers.

Chapter Twelve

"So how does one get an audience with the Overseers?" Anthony stopped her heart with that question. She stared at him, scrambling mentally. "And don't try to placate me. The sun rises in two hours. You will leave me for that gray, lifeless hell." The growl in the last words betrayed his lack of patience.

But could she blame him? For the last week, they'd fallen into a pattern. Rehearsals for hours, returning to his suite sometimes with just a few precious minutes before the sun rose and the world would fade away from her. He waited for her to wake at sunset, making love to her as soon as the blood coursed through her veins again. They'd been fortunate this evening that the show seemed nearly complete and Heidi released them all early. Most of the girls escaped into the casino proper to play, but she and Anthony took his cats back to the suite. She lay with her chin tucked against his chest, wrapped around his sleek body, soaking up his heat.

He'd waited. He'd been patient. But her cat was done.

Dammit, he's not my cat. But no matter how much her mind resisted, it didn't change what her heart and her soul already embraced—Anthony was hers. She went to Heidi because she worried about this moment—the moment he would push to see the Overseers. When he would interfere in the only bargaining chip she had to protect her sister.

Because if forced to choose—how could she not choose him? "If I asked you to leave it alone, would you?"

"I have left it alone. I've left it alone for a week. I share your body and your heart, but not your mind and not your burdens. You keep holding yourself back and…" A growl interrupted the purr vibrating through him and his hands flexed against her. "I *want* you. All of you. Not just the pieces."

"It's my burden, Anthony." Gods, why couldn't he understand that? She didn't want to trap him in this interminable hell with her—even this brief respite—it would end. He would have to leave unless he wanted to negotiate with the—

She refused that thought any more purchase in her mind. She didn't want the Overseers to get their hands on him. She would kill them all.

The violence burst free of the cocoon of servitude she'd forced herself into. If she could have fought her sister free all those years ago, she would have. She'd adopted the wait and see—the game of service—to stay close to her so that when Cerveau was Jamiela again, they could be free.

But as long as Cerveau existed, her shield-sister would not be free. A warm, callused hand tugged her chin, lifting her from his chest until she was forced to meet his gaze. “Then share the burden of that oath with me. You’re my mate. Your oaths are mine.”

“An oath I made when you were a boy can’t be yours.” She pulled her chin from his hand and pushed up. She could barely think when she touched him.

“Mates, Roseâtre.” He pulled her around, refusing to let her retreat and their gazes clashed. “Mates in everything, not just bed, not just a show. Your burdens are my burdens. Would you let me face down my uncle alone?”

“Of course not.” The answer swift and immediate sent a look of satisfaction across his face.

“Then why do you demand that I let you shoulder this alone? I lost my bid to lead when I was not much more than a boy. Arrogance and pride made me walk away from my Pride rather than bend a knee to him that bested me.”

“We’re all subject to the mistakes of our youth…”

“Then you can tell me the truth of why it is you’re here. Why you refuse to remove the slave bands—why you’ve submitted to the control of another, or I’ll get my answers from those you submit to when I challenge them for the life and safety of my mate. I won’t leave you in servitude.”

Challenge.

With that one word, he bashed down the great wall of Troy holding her soul captive. If he challenged the Overseers, he risked his freedom. Worse, he would risk his life.

“Cerveau is the librarian of the tribe. She is bound by debt to serve the Arcana Royale until she surrenders the knowledge she took from their Sphinx.”

Surprise rippled across his features. “How did she…?”

“I don’t know.” Roseâtre sighed. Relief at letting it out relaxed her and she settled her body against the long length of him, a masculine cushion to the harsh reality of her condition. She indulged in the way her curves seemed to fit to him, the lazy possessiveness of his leg thrust between hers, the heat of his thigh nestled against her sex.

A week ago, she would have snorted. This moment, she could imagine no other way. Her mother would kill her. But she banished the queen from her thoughts.

“Tell me,” he murmured, stroking his hand through her hair. He was petting her like she was one of his cats and, odder still, she enjoyed the soothing display of ownership.

“Cerveau’s real name is Jaimela.” The answer easier to speak than she imagined. “We were raised together, trained together and in every

way, she is my shield-sister. Her shield. My sword. We were inseparable. But at our majority, it was knowledge she longed to conquer, not the battlefield. I didn't mind the change of direction. In fact, I admired it. She's the smartest person I've ever met. Her mind deciphers puzzles the way Castilian steel severs flesh."

The story flowed from her easily, bearing no hiccup of shame. That ease, more than any mark his sexy mouth left on her flesh, revealed the imprint their mating left on her soul. A flash of regret died a simple death at the happiness cascading into her heart. She would never be alone again. Her shield-sister and her mate would bracket her, protect her from all sides.

Her mate.

She rubbed her hand against his belly, tracing the ridges of his abdomen. She would mark him here. Where it would be plain to all.

He was hers.

"Ruth?" Her name sounded both delicious and odd on his lips.

"Ruthie," she whispered. It was an almost shy confession. "That's what my friends call me."

"Ruthie." He tested the syllables. "Ruthie. I like it. Softer. Sexier."

She laughed. It was hardly a sexy name, except that it turned her inside out when he said it.

"Jaimela loves knowledge," he prompted.

"Yes. She visited the Oracle at Delphi and spent several nights in the temple of Athena. She told me that the goddess visited her dreams."

"A rarity in these times." His understanding unlocked another seal inside her heart. He was quickly nesting himself inside of her, becoming as vital to her existence as air.

"Yes. A great honor. When she came before my mother and begged leave to quest, the court was stunned. No Amazon had been called to quest in five hundred years, since the time my grandmother ruled. It was without question that Jaimela would be granted the leave to go."

"And you took the oath to go with her. To protect her on her quest." Of course he understood.

Gods, she loved him.

She *loved* him.

"Yes." The emotion rolled through her, a pervasive wind that shattered what remained of the wall. "Her quest took us around the world. We visited temples throughout Asia Minor, the Pacific and deep into South America. We watched the sun climb the sides of Machu Pichu and the moon achieve her zenith over the lost jaguar temples of the Maya. But we pushed on, forever roaming, as Athena's messages arrived in the form of owls."

“Until you arrived here.”

“Yes.” Roseâtre dropped her head to lie against his chest, the thump of his heart beating in her ear a sweet reminder of shared passion. Her heart echoed the cadence of his. He was everywhere inside of her, she could almost feel the sprout of his fur, caressing her, comforting her.

“What happened when you arrived at the Arcana Royale?”

“I don’t know.” The confession hurt, but truth often did. “We walked inside the lobby. Jaimela practically bounced with excitement. She kept murmuring ‘it’s here, it’s here’ and then she just went still. Her eyes glazed. Her mouth slackened and nothing I did could rouse her.”

Her throat clogged with remembered frustration, anger and even a tinge of fear. She’d been faced by nothing to battle, nothing to strike down, only the empty eyed face of her sister. Helpless.

Anthony’s arms caged her, his hands stroking and petting. Tears slid down her face in earnest. The loss as poignant now as it had been then. “The Overseers summoned me before them. Jaimela had broken a covenant, stolen knowledge, and by the laws that govern this place, she would serve until she surrendered what she had taken, returned it to its rightful place.”

“Why doesn’t she just do it then?” It wasn’t callousness or anger in his tone, but true question.

“Because, she doesn’t remember. The person she became—Cerveau—she doesn’t remember what Jaimela did. It’s as though another exists there—she is and is not my sister.” Roseâtre lifted her head, sniffling back the tears. “Despite their claims and what I heard, she offers no recollection of what happened that morning when we walked in and barely remembers the life we shared before that moment. It’s as if Jaimela died when she entered the lobby and only Cerveau remains.”

“She’s not dead.” He stripped away the veil of sadness.

“What?” Lifting her head, she gazed at him, searching. “Why do you say that?”

“She came to me and she smelled different—looked different—hell, she even sounded different. She told me to take you away from here, to convince you to go. But then she went cold again, ice in her eyes and the other told me you would never leave.”

He’d spoken to Jaimela. In all their years here, she’d seen almost no evidence of her sister. Only the hard possession of the other.

If she woke now—what did that mean?

He caressed her cheek, smoothing her hair back and tucking it behind her ear. “So they consigned her to serve as a showgirl?” Bafflement creased his expression.

“It was the safest route they offered.”

“And your slave bands?”

“I wouldn’t leave her. I *won’t*.” There. She’d confessed it. The oath that bound her to the sister who couldn’t even remember the crime she’d supposedly committed. The sacrifice of her own freedom to remain at her side. The interminable journey with no light at the end.

“You’re amazing.” Anthony’s words startled her as did the fierce kiss he stroked over her lips. “Abso-freaking-lutely amazing.”

“Why? Because I failed?”

“Hardly.” His expression hardened. “You’ve maintained your oath, given up that which is vital to the existence of a being, willingly tendered your body and soul to stay at her side and I love you for it.”

His declaration decimated the fragments of the wall around her. She could almost feel the cat stretching inside of him, purring up against her skin.

“But you can’t serve this oath like this any longer.” He pressed his fingers to her lips, stifling the objection. “If you’re right and your sister has been locked beneath that other all this time and she’s rousing—who’s to say that your staying in those damnable bands is not holding her captive as well?”

Logic and reason collided with fierce emotion. Her gut choked at the idea of leaving, her heart rent in two and yet… “How could my staying affect her?”

“I don’t know.” At least he was honest. “But you’ve trapped yourself to protect her and if you won’t leave, maybe she won’t either. You don’t know if she understands *why* you’re here. And if she wants you to go…does that not release you from your oath?”

The twisted suggestion appealed to her. “What if that’s just what I want to hear? What if I just want a reason to go so I don’t feel like an oath-breaker?”

“You don’t need a reason. Those damnable bands bind you so that you can’t leave. But if you remove them, then your choices become your own again. What is the more difficult battle? The one where you follow orders or give them?”

Roseâtre rubbed her face. She knew the answer to that one. “Following orders is easy.”

“Exactly. They have to come off, Ruthie. You belong to me and I to you. No one else. We won’t give up on your sister and we have months of the show left. But if she’s waking now, then now is the time to act.”

“But I can’t stay here without them.”

“Yes, you can. We’ll find a way. I don’t care how long it takes. But the bands come off.”

The order should have rankled. But it didn’t. Instead, a new

sensation bloomed in her breast. One that vaguely resembled hope.

"Will you let me remove the bands?"

Would she? Could she dare?

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Afraid of the battle?" he challenged, his blue eyes dark and assessing.

"No." Absolutely not.

"Then we face each battle as it comes. But you're *mine* and I don't share. Will you take the bands off?"

"I don't share, either."

"Trust me, princess. You don't have to. Now, will you, for the love of the gods, take the damn bands off?"

"No." Roseâtre exhaled. Determination surged through her, a fierce pride and sense of self that she'd nearly forgotten. "But I will take them off for the love of you."

Chapter Thirteen

Anthony wasted no time when she'd conceded to taking the bands off. He scooped up the half-forgotten key from the stone table and used it to remove the shackles on her wrists and the collar from her throat. They both stared at the items as though expecting them to spark and explode, but they did neither. They disappeared in a shimmer of golden light as though they'd never been.

Good riddance.

Hours later, entangled together in the sheets, Anthony watched her slumbering face. A slender alarm beeped on his phone.

Sunrise.

He held his breath. Her lashes fluttered open, revealing new flecks of gold amongst the field of her hazel eyes.

"Boo."

He grinned, relieved. They spent the day making love, sleeping and eating but she was never out of his arm's reach. The three stripes on her arm remained, the scars still pink. He liked those almost as much as the single stripe she'd given him.

Heidi waited for them on the theatre stage when they arrived for rehearsal, the tigers trailing Anthony and Roseâtre like a guard of honor. Her amused expression swept over them, from Anthony's arm around Roseâtre's back to the lift of her chin.

Anthony tensed, ready for anything.

The stage manager laughed, clapping her hands together in solitary applause. "Well done, Mr. diNapoli. Well done. I was beginning to worry you wouldn't have it in you."

"You knew?" Roseâtre gaped, shocked.

"Of course, I did." Heidi's smug expression gentled. "And it's about time too. We just have to decide what to do about the show."

Anthony made a cutting gesture. "Roseâtre performs, regardless of the damn bands. We'll honor our commitments."

"I thought as much." Heidi nodded, satisfied. "Well, you should get to work. The show opens soon, and we still haven't done a complete run-through. No more stage nookie for the two of you."

Roseâtre's strangled laughter was music to his ears.

A few days before opening night, Anthony found a few moments to use the phone. Roseâtre swam lazily in the pool, playing with Nalini. In just two short weeks, his princess had undergone quite the transformation. She no longer looked askance at the cats, but had drawn the line at letting them pile onto the bed with them.

The ring in his ear died as someone answered the other end of the line.

"Hello?" The earthy voice was low, husky and distinctly female.

"Mother?"

"Anthony!"

Warmth shook him. In the decades since his uncle handed him his ass in battle and ordered him to submit or leave, he hadn't had the courage to face his mother. She'd wept openly when he'd chosen to walk away.

"Yes, Mama, it's Anthony."

"Are you finally ready to come home?"

He wrestled with himself. He'd explained his shame to Roseâtre and instead of disappointment or disgust, she'd merely slugged him in the arm and told him to grow a pair. Leadership wasn't about winning. It was about doing what was best for the tribe or Pride. She'd sacrificed her freedom, her sense of self to protect a tribe member that didn't even remember her. Could he do any less?

"Yes." The word was short, a breath. But as his gaze slid over the pool, he met Roseâtre's—no, Ruthie's—grin. She gave him a thumb's up. They would return to his Pride. He would bow to his uncle. He wasn't all that interested in the burden of leadership, but she promised to back him every step of the way if he wanted to take it back.

"All the better to watch your ass," she'd teased.

"Mama, I have a mate and I want to bring her home to meet all of you." He held his breath during the long silence greeting his statement.

Finally, his mother's soft sigh drifted musically through the phone. "It's about time…"

Cerveau's reaction was nothing like he expected. It took several days of rehearsal to get all the girls comfortable. Not even the vampire, Kiki, took her role as seriously as Ruthie, but they managed. Together, they adjusted the storyline, tweaking the turning points, the dark moment and the ending.

"So you'll stay with the show for the seventy-five shows the diNapoli tigers are scheduled to perform." Cerveau sat next to Ruthie at the stage edge. Anthony stood on the theatre floor, watching them. The quiet agony in Ruthie's eyes slashed at his soul. No matter how much they discussed the issue, he knew that leaving would hurt her. But if her shield-sister was as loyal as she, the princess's absence might motivate Jaimela to come out again, to fight to be at her sister's side.

"Maybe longer. But I don't know for sure." Ruthie cast a glance at

him and he nodded. Unquestioningly. Even if they left the Arcana Royale they wouldn't give up on Jaimela. So if that meant putting on a cat and pony show every night, they would do it.

"It's a selfish decision, but you deserve it." Cerveau nodded. "Even if he's a bit of a fun burglar to steal you away." Yes, the woman smelled of Amazon, but she didn't smell right and the painted emptiness in her features reminded Anthony forcefully of Roseâtre's turn into a porcelain doll. Only in Cerveau's case, the animation seemed wrong somehow, hollow.

"Jaimela…" Ruthie began, but the woman's smile evaporated and her expression went completely cold. She drew away from Ruthie and stood.

"We have rehearsals and if your time here is that short, then you should make the most of it."

Pain rippled through his mate, but she buried it. He caught her hand in his, resisting the urge to rub it against his cheek. She needed comforting, but she wouldn't appreciate it in front of their audience.

"Why are you people sitting on your asses? We have a show to perfect. Move, move, move!" Heidi shooed them back to work. Ruthie squeezed his hand once before letting go and then followed her sister back to the stage, but Anthony paused, studying the stage manager.

"Honey, I'm way too much woman for you." Heidi tweaked his nose. If anyone else tried that, he'd have taken their hand off, but there was something distinctly maternal about this Heidi and the crazy, little demon that raced around her heels, constantly chattering. The minion was even now creeping up on Nalini, the white tiger's gaze bored with the childish tricks.

They wouldn't hurt each other, but Ruthie scooped the minion up, tail first to tease her.

"You going to stand there looking all broody and edible or get back to work?" Heidi still watched him.

"I have a question for you." He grinned. The woman said the most outrageous things at the oddest time. He liked that about her.

"Just one? I must be losing my touch."

"Yes. Why did you ask me to come to the Arcana Royale? When you called me, I had a lucrative offer in Monaco, the first in months, but you nearly doubled what they offered me. So why did you want me here?"

Heidi smiled, the humor glinting in her eyes. "You are a smart one, Anthony. Stubborn, hotheaded and a little foolish at times, but a smart one nonetheless. I brought you here for two reasons." She ticked them off with her fingers. "Because the show needed the help and this performance is the best we've managed since we lost Pandora. It will be exquisite and a sellout, more than covering your ridiculously high

fee as well as that hedonistic suite you requested."

Anthony laughed. He couldn't argue. The rainforest suite was the second best part of the job. The first was Ruthie.

"I'm sure you can guess the second."

"I can. But how did *you* know?"

"Now, that would be telling." Heidi snapped her fingers. Anthony blinked. She'd disappeared, just like that.

Maddening woman.

"Yo, Anthony!" Ruthie bellowed from the stage, and he forgot about the stage manager, her enigmatic smiles and her mysterious words. She'd brought him here to meet Ruthie. He'd send her roses every year on the anniversary of their first rehearsal and it didn't matter why.

Opening night, the backstage area was a riot of colorful chaos. The dancers flitted about half-naked. Anthony leaned against Roseâtre's makeup table, a bemused expression on his face. It was insane and fun. Breasts bobbed as costumes were shuffled. The air was ripe with the scent of hairspray and deodorant.

Kiki oo'ed and aah'ed over a pair of crystalline-and-gold pumps that Ruthie—he just couldn't think of her as Roseâtre anymore—dropped on her table as he and his mate walked through. The girls squealed, hugged and danced and then were off again.

"Will you miss this?" he asked quietly, the one question he hadn't dare ask before.

"Yes." Her face was a riot of makeup. She'd layered it heavily, explaining that the stage makeup had to be visible to people in the back row. But her eyelashes fascinated him. She'd fringed them with silver, and the striping of white on black illuminated the streak in her hair. "But we have time yet. Time to help Cerveau and we could be here for years if we're a hit. Do you mind that?"

No. His home was where Ruthie was whether it was some pleasure-drenched casino in the middle of a North American desert or roaming free in the mountains of his homeland or, the gods help him, the corporate headquarters of her tribe's businesses in Dubai. "Your oaths are mine."

She caught his hands, fingers interlacing together. "And yours are mine."

Anthony bent down and thoroughly smudged her lipstick, the deep kiss just enough to pacify the tiger that wanted to sweep her up and take her right there, so no one would have any doubt who she belonged to or who he belonged to for that matter.

A chorus of *ooohs* broke through the lazy passion, and he lifted his head to meet Ruthie's amused eyes. But the dancers were already

fluttering back to work.

"Anthony. Roseâtre." Stan stood at the edge of the chaos and beckoned them over. Anthony pulled out Ruthie's chair.

Stan glanced at the other dancers, a hard stare until they got back to work. "The Overseers want to see you both. Right now."

Roseâtre's hand turned to ice against his palm. He didn't let her pull away. "I take it they're down here?"

"Heidi's office. You need to be fast. We're going to have a full house." Stan waved them on their way and walked up the concrete stairs to the stage area rather than escort them.

"Anthony…" Anxiety quavered in her voice.

"We're not going to keep them waiting." He guided her toward the stage manager's office.

"You don't understand what they're like." Her scent sharpened, hints of snow biting through the musk.

He paused and studied her. She was upset, and while fear edged through her, she wasn't afraid. No, not afraid at all. Anger flowed through her. Anger and protectiveness. "You have my back?"

"Of course." Her fierce response gave him another reason to smile.

"I have yours. Stay close to me."

"Switch hands." She let go of him and circled around, taking his right hand in her left. She wanted her sword arm free even if she didn't have a sword.

He could appreciate that.

The door opened before he could knock.

Five figures occupied Heidi's bookshelf-enclosed office, each shrouded in a gray cloak. Anthony could read no expression on their hidden faces, but their scents—those he could taste. Foreign, alien, cold, fur and death. Ruthie stayed firm at his side, her head up and shoulders back. He could almost see the crown that should rest on her brow. A thousand rumors about the Overseers circulated throughout the world. Intimidating. All-powerful. Mysterious.

Their identities were secret. The one Overseer he'd ever heard of being revealed died within a day of the news breaking. That fact spawned new rumors. But every rumor agreed on one facet. The Overseers were dangerous.

Anthony considered these faceless men and women. He could scent both genders. *Am I supposed to bow?* The fur in his soul bristled at the very concept.

"You need not bow nor speak, Mr. diNapoli. You are here merely as a courtesy. Our business is with Princess Ruth Ann." The laconic words came from the faceless figure closest to them. He smelled of vampire.

Ruthie squeezed his hand and he heeded her warning, even if he didn't like it. "Yes, your graces?" His princess didn't bow either.

"You have ended your contract with the Midnight Mystery Lounge." It wasn't a question. The same figure spoke, but Anthony didn't make the mistake of ignoring the other four.

"From a certain point of view, your graces, yes, I have."

Her wording caught his attention and theirs.

"Explain," was the droll response from the gray-sheathed vampire.

"Through no fault of anyone but my own, my punishment was given unto Anthony diNapoli. He chose not to punish me, but to allow me to earn my freedom through single combat."

Anthony tensed. It wasn't a lie, precisely, but it also didn't scent of the complete story.

"That is not entirely the truth." Dammit, the vampire noticed as well.

"No, but it was a direct result of that combat that I chose to take the freedom that has always existed in my contract with you." Ruthie didn't back down from the story and when the gray figure took a step in her direction, Anthony curled his toes against the carpet and settled his weight onto the balls of his feet.

Vampire or not, he could take it out before it took another step if necessary.

"Intriguing," a feminine voice whispered from the back of the room.

"Very," a third gender-neutral voice agreed.

"Hardly. I told you he would defend the princess," a bored fourth intruded. "And unless you wish to provoke his claws into your throat, you should remember that."

Anthony switched his attention to the fourth speaker. The male smelled of fur, but not cat and not wolf. Bear perhaps? He couldn't be certain and didn't feel the need for closer inspection.

The first figure waved a hand for silence and the four fell quiet. "You understand that the terms of your employment were based upon your acquiescence to the bands?"

"I do." Her nails dug into his hand and he held firm.

"Then you will not be performing this evening?"

"Her term with the Midnight Mystery Lounge may have ended, but she is a member of the diNapoli tigers and must perform or we will have no show." He didn't doubt that he was the subject of their regard, because no surprise rippled through the collected at his statement. "I'll also put you on notice that we intend to free the Amazon, Jaimela."

Her hand convulsed around his. He surprised her. Again.

A small smile curled his lips. He liked surprising her.

"The Amazon Jaimela serves out her term as decried by this council when she stole from the Arcana Royale until such time as she returns that which was stolen." The laconic voice hardened. "Your petition to have the Princess Ruth Ann added to your group is approved but only for the seventy-five shows in your contract."

"And when the run ends?" He pushed his luck.

"Prove successful and discuss it with the stage manager." The indolent reply offered a decent compromise. He would keep his mate as close to her sister as circumstances would allow.

As one the figures turned away and Ruthie pulled free of his hand to take a step forward. "That's it?"

They paused.

"You were never the one we took issue with, Princess. You struck the bargain, petitioned us for the right, whether you stay or go has always been up to you," the female answered.

Anthony wrapped his hand around her arm to pull her back lest she aggravate them further.

"I would ask a question."

He sighed.

The figures turned to face her, one at a time. The vampire motioned her to speak.

"If Jaimela took something from your Sphinx, why can you not take it back?"

As questions went, it was a fair one.

The five figures remained silent so long Anthony feared they would not answer.

"To answer that question, you must understand what your shield-sister sought at the behest of Athena. Discover that answer and you will know what needs be done."

The five disappeared between one blink of an eye and the next. Ruthie fell back a step and bumped into him. He wrapped an arm around her midsection and cradled her against his chest.

"I take it they never said that to you before," he murmured against her hair.

"No."

"Do you know what she sought?"

Ruthie shook her head slowly. "She never told me and I never asked."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"It was her quest." She turned in his arms and tipped her head back to look at him. "Have the gods ever talked to you?"

He shook his head once.

"Me either." But instead of pulling away in frustration as he

feared she might, she burrowed closer to him. “When these shows are over—I may have to petition a goddess.”

Anthony thought about that. “Greece is lovely this time of year.”

“It could take years.”

He shrugged. “I don’t care. I know this is new to you. I know mating is new to you, but where you go, I go. If it takes us the rest of our lives to discover the secret to Jaimela’s freedom, I won’t abandon you or your quest.”

Ruthie jolted at that turn of my phrase.

“My quest?”

“Yes, princess. Your quest.” He nibbled a kiss to her earlobe and then gave her bottom a light swat. “We’ll make our plans for that later. We’re due onstage.”

She laughed, sliding her fingers into his hair and pulling him down for a harder, lengthier kiss. “I’ll get you back for that swat later.”

“I look forward to it.”

An hour later, he stalked onto the stage, sliding through the jets of stage mist to prowl around Ruthie dancing nude at the imaginary bathing pool, a glittering wash of light spilling down to mimic the falls.

His nose twitched.

Weres were close.

Weretigers.

And worse.

The heavy, metallic sting of bronze clogged his nose.

Amazons.

He paused, his flat eyes gazing out into the darkness. His Pride and her Tribe were in the audience. He lifted his head, a rumble of sound vibrating his chest, clashing with the music.

A roar that cried *watch and learn*.

Chapter Fourteen

The applause was fierce as the final curtain descended, Ruthie's wild princess wrapped around the tiger, a sword in her hand. She would defend him against the entire world. They'd chosen the ending and it was like mating with her all over again. When the curtain dropped, he waited for Ruthie to slide off before shifting.

He hadn't had time to warn her.

Skin stretched and burning, he ignored the playful whistles of the girls over his nudity. The vain cat preened at the attention of only one woman, and Ruthie's eyes were bright with interest and lust.

"Wait." He pressed his fingers to her lips when she went to kiss him. "They're coming."

"Who?"

The curtain parted and Anthony shifted his stance, bracing a step in front and to the right of his mate. The queen entered the stage area first, halting the dancers in their paths with one frosty look. Queen Alexiares was tall, fine-boned and carried just a hint of gray in her dark hair, a testament to her long life and strong will.

"Mother," Ruthie squeaked, dropping into a deep bow, blade pointed down.

"Ruth Ann." Disapproval quivered in the words. "Did you really mate that tiger?"

Anthony's fingers curled, but he held himself still. He couldn't interfere. Not yet.

"Yes, Mother. I mated Anthony." Ruthie straightened, her posture loose but prepared. Ever the warrior.

The queen sighed.

"Interesting choice, nephew." His uncle sauntered onto the stage. A sly smile twisted his lips. He was not the dark, maniacal cartoon villain Anthony often imagined, but a well-dressed, coifed businessman with white-blond hair that stood in stark contrast to his ruddy skin.

"Uncle." Anthony didn't bow, but he managed to incline his head. It was the only submission he was willing to show. There was still too much water under that bridge.

"It looks like we both lose, Alexiares." His uncle's voice boomed with laughter, not malice. Anthony quirked a look at Ruthie, but she shook her head once, a quick negative. She had no idea what they were talking about either.

"I see that. Very well, I'll sign the treaty."

"Yes, we will. Shall we?" He gestured to the curtain and the queen paused.

Her cool gaze raked over Anthony and he had the strangest feeling she was sizing him up for the kill. Ruthie moved, her blade turning upward and she positioned herself in front of him.

"Truly, daughter. You would challenge me?"

Anthony's heart froze. Amazon queens battled to the death. It was the only way to preserve their strength, their honor and their crowns.

"With a heavy heart, your majesty. But make no mistake. Anthony is mine and I protect what is mine."

"Even if mating him makes you mortal?" The queen's words sent a bracing cold shock through his soul. "You cannot be both Pride and Tribe."

"We're mated. It's done. You taught me to own what I want." His mate's unflinching response warmed the shock with true pride.

"You always were a bit of a brat." A reluctant smile tugged the regal woman's face. "Keep your cat. We'll discuss this at the New Year's meeting. I expect both of you there."

She stepped through the curtain held open by the Pride Alpha and disappeared. Anthony glided his hands up Ruthie's arms and pulled her willing body back to his chest.

"What. The. Hell?" She murmured the words echoing in his soul.

"Mortal?" He inhaled her scent, finding comfort.

"Amazons who take a mate lose the gift of immortality."

She sacrificed eternal life for him. "I…"

"Just remember when I start wrinkle. They really are your fault." She winked, but his chest tightened.

"I love you."

"I know."

"Ahh, wagers. They are fun." Heidi trundled out, shooing the dancers away and pointing at the cats until they sprawled on the rapidly emptying stage.

"What wager?" The question echoed between them.

Heidi paused at the curtain where their leaders had exited and smiled at them. It was a beatific smile that was both excited and smug.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes," they chorused. Anthony's arms tightened around Ruthie and she snuggled her head back against his shoulder.

"A wager between Ares and Athena. Didn't think gods liked to wager, did you? But these two siblings are both hard headed when it comes to their viewpoints on war. Your tribe and his Pride are just examples of that war. Ares urges attack, Athena urges defense. Both love to win."

"I don't understand," Ruthie murmured. "What does that have to do with us?"

“You were stolen as an infant, Princess Ruth. Before you, your mother had given birth to ten sons and no daughters. Ares was pleased, because every son she brought into the world was warlike and powerful.”

“They’re executives. They don’t even use real weapons, just stock prices and bad Facebook comments.”

Anthony had to swallow a laugh at the incredulity stretching through Ruthie’s words.

“Yes, well. It is what it is. But you were kidnapped by Anthony’s Pride…”

The tiger in him went still. He could scent no lie. “My great-grandfather.”

“Exactly. That is why Queen Alexiares wears him as a cape. It’s a warning to not touch what’s hers again. But it was too late, Athena and Ares both saw that Princess Ruth had been marked.” She motioned to the white stripe in Ruthie’s hair.

“So the gods wagered.”

“On what?” Ruthie’s voice strained with irritation. She wanted Heidi to get to the point, but Anthony tipped his head down, looking at his mate and her white stripe. It always smelled different from the rest of her.

It smelled like Pride.

“They wagered on who was right. Was it better to be offensive or defensive?” Heidi grinned again, obviously not sharing the best part of the wager with them.

“And?” Anthony stroked his fingers through Ruthie’s damp hair, tugging the white lock. “Who won?”

“The House did. And I suppose so did the two of you.”

“We changed the rules of war.” Ruthie exhaled slowly. “We were both defensive and offensive, but we made love, not war.”

“Exactly. Which means that neither of those two pompous windbags are right, at least not in this wager, so the Royale, which guaranteed the bet, wins.”

“And the price is peace.” Anthony wanted to laugh. Without even being aware of it, they’d just overturned centuries of tribal warfare between their peoples.

“Yes. Your children will be the focal point of the final treaty, so you’ll likely be consulted. But we have decades before that will be a real issue. Just plan to raise them as both Pride and Amazons. Great show tonight. Brilliant execution. They couldn’t pick their jaws up off the floor. I thought your uncle was going to have a coronary. So, ta-ta for now.” Heidi ducked out of the curtains, leaving them alone on the stage, a faux garden of Eden.

“She said children,” Ruthie whispered.

“Yes, she did.” Anthony dipped his head down and nibbled on her shoulder.

“*Chil-dren*, Anthony. That means more than one.”

“I know what it means, Ruthie.” He scooped her up, sweeping the blade away and striding off the stage. “But she also said we have decades before that’s an issue.”

“Where are we going then?”

“To practice.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Her laughter resonated through him. He didn’t really care about the gods and their wagers or tribal politics or the house winning. His arms were full with his great fortune.

And he planned to enjoy the hell out of it.

“Anthony?”

“Yes, my princess?”

“Put clothes on before we go through the lobby. I don’t want you to start a riot.”

“You’d protect me.”

“But then I’d get blood on these shoes.”

He laughed. “So you’re worried about a little blood?”

Sliding her shoes off one at a time, she wiggled her toes. “Nope. I can defend you quite easily…barefoot and brutal.”

He hopped off the stage. “Yes, you can.”

“You like living dangerously, don’t you?” But she didn’t argue as he strode through the doors toward the lobby. The sooner they made it back to their suite, the better.

“No, I like—love living with you.” He kissed her hard, silencing any further objections. They had many years ahead to disagree, tease, battle, conquer and make up with sex.

My mate…my rules.

She bit his lip and he growled. “What was that for?”

“You marked me…I think it’s time I marked you.” She lifted her chin, challenge shining in her eyes.

“Will you ever stop battling me?”

“No.”

He grinned. “Good.” He wouldn’t have her any other way.

About the Author

Heather Long lives in Texas with her family and their menagerie of animals. As a child, Heather skipped picture books and enjoyed the Harlequin romance novels by Penny Jordan and Nora Roberts that her grandmother read to her. Heather believes that laughter is as important to life as breathing and that the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus are very real. In the meanwhile, she is hard at work on her next novel.

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